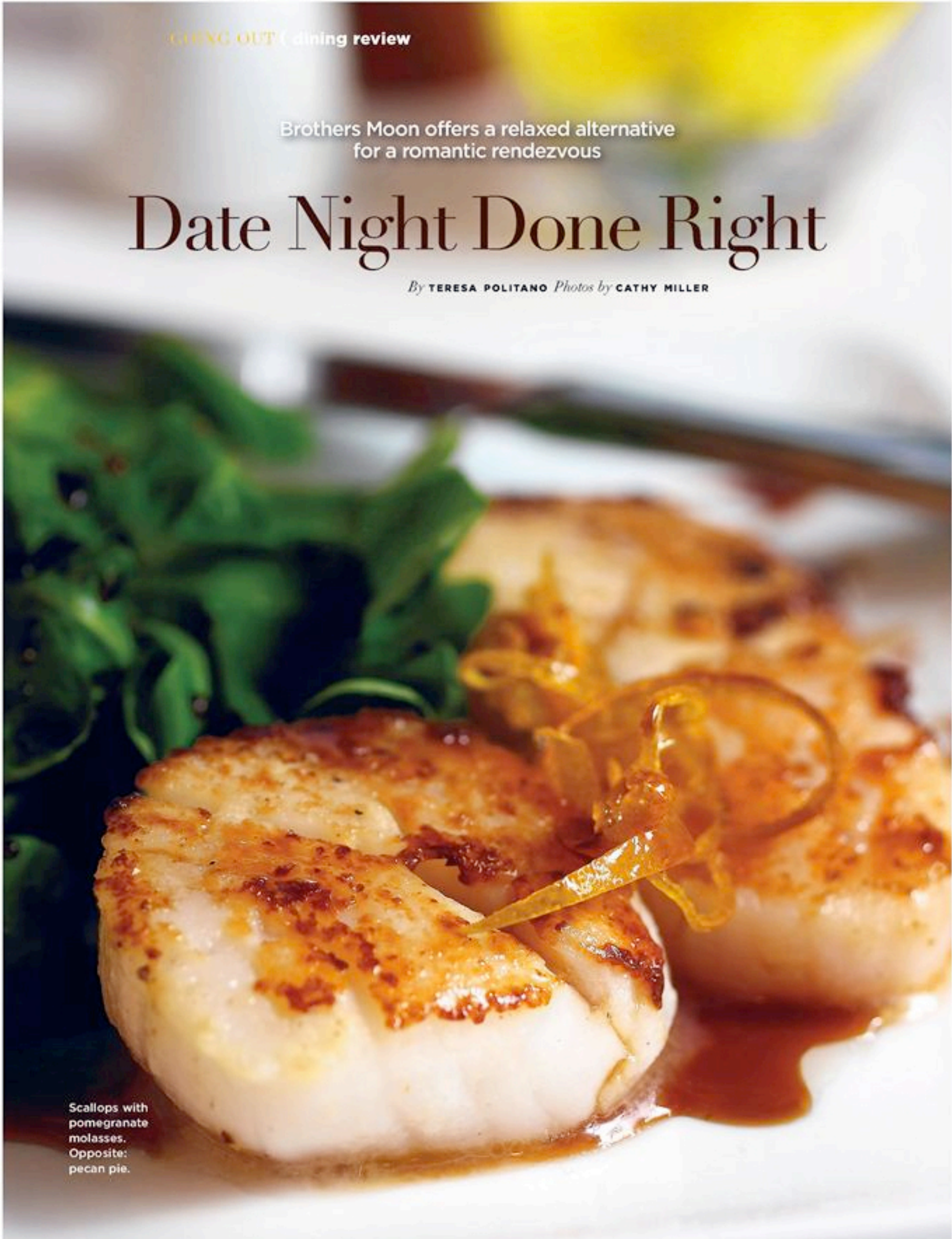


GOING OUT (dining review

Brothers Moon offers a relaxed alternative
for a romantic rendezvous

Date Night Done Right

By TERESA POLITANO Photos by CATHY MILLER



Scallops with
pomegranate
molasses.
Opposite:
pecan pie.

Brothers Moon

7 West Broad St., Hopewell

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brothersmoon.com

★★★

Hopewell remains the kind of quaint New Jersey town that is still small enough to require a general store and far enough from suburban sprawl to pose no serious threat to wildlife, which means a deer darting across the two narrow lanes of Route 518 in front of your car is a real possibility — as if you, not it, were the rarity.

But despite its size — a little more than 2,000 people live here — Hopewell Township also offers its sophistications. The Ruth Morpeth Gallery along Broad Street is a crisp and inviting artist showcase; the Hopewell Museum preserves the town's place in history as a Revolutionary landmark: This is where George Washington landed when he crossed the Delaware on Christmas Day in 1776. During the summer, the Bucks County Playhouse performs in the Open Air Theatre at Washington Crossing State Park, and the famous Lindbergh Mansion is a just a few miles away.

Brothers Moon, an unpretentious fine-dining restaurant that is also a cafe, deli, takeout restaurant, brunch spot and catering facility, seems perfectly suited to this historic town. It was opened in 2001 by chef Will Mooney, whose résumé includes other state favorites — the Frog and the Peach and Stage Left, both in New Brunswick, and the Stockton Inn. He and his wife, Beth Judge, an artisan jeweler, run the restaurant.

Indeed, for those either feeling desirous or compelled to celebrate the looming February holiday, this restaurant offers a perfect antidote to the saccharine and fussy Hallmark occasion Valentine's Day has become.

Brothers Moon, a tiny 80-seat BYO, is an honest and comfortable restaurant; the food will impress your date, yes, but the atmosphere will allow you to relax, to laugh, and even — should you wish to take advantage of a much less-pressurized setting — make a marriage proposal. One suspects those who do consent to marriage in a place such as this already have a healthy, fun and authentic relationship. (Even more fun: Brothers Moon features a menu of aphrodisiacs on Valentine's Day.)

Even without a proposal, dinner provides its share of drama. The best appetizer of the night was the marinated grilled jumbo scallops with pomegranate molasses (\$14). The scallops looked stunning, with their crisscross of grill marks, and tasted equally so. But the pomegranate molasses was just a

Key to the stars

Extraordinary ★★★★★

Excellent ★★★

Good ★★

Fair ★



standout accompaniment, slightly sweet and energetic.

In fact, at Brothers Moon, we fell in love with the sauces — the pomegranate molasses with the scallops, the honey mint with the lamb. The word sauce itself on a restaurant menu seems to imply heaviness, an overwhelming quality, and sauces often are intolerably suffocating. Here, though, they were lovely, just a hint, a kiss, of a taste. These were less sauce and more invitation.

Roasted kabocha squash soup with sage and brown butter (\$8) sounded earthy and musky; it was homey and good, but somehow tasted a bit lackluster, especially compared to the verve of the other dishes. More energetic was the evening's special salad — frisée with smoked bacon, apple cider vinaigrette, rich Stilton cheese and roasted apples from Terhune Orchards (which were luscious).

Roasted masala spiced lamb rack (\$31) was intriguing; the lamb was good, the masala spice was gentle and the dish was accompanied by the aforementioned honey mint sauce. The side of couscous, however, tasted ordinary. Grilled filet mignon (\$29) came with a green peppercorn, brandy and Dijon sauce. We've seen steaks served with a thick river of peppercorn sauce; here the sauce was a tender aside. Who would want to steal the thunder of a filet anyway?

Desserts (\$8) were astounding. Our waiter recommended the pecan pie, and we resisted, because pecan pie always brings regrets — it's sticky sweet, and you always feel as though you need to be rolled out the door afterwards. But this is a recipe from central Texas, land of pecans, and was the best pecan pie we've ever had — with not too many pecans and an impressively good homemade pastry. This pie won't leave you feeling uncomfortable, and it was served with freshly whipped cream, homemade sorbet from Princeton's Bent Spoon, and, luckily for us, spring Chandler strawberries that, Mooney told us later, he had just pulled from the freezer. The sponge cake also was light and fresh, with fresh berries, and came with a luscious mango sorbet.

Brothers Moon was so named because Mooney's twin brother helped finance the restaurant. Mooney, who grew up in East Brunswick, now lives three blocks from the restaurant and sends his children to the local schools. For a man who champions simple, honest, local ingredients, that too seems a perfect fit. ☆