

A room to remember on Harbord's restaurant row

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HARBORD ROOM

89 Harbord St., Toronto. 416-962-8989. Dinner for two with wine, tax and tip, \$130.

Toronto, like every sophisticated city, has its "restaurant rows," neighbourhoods that are chockablock with restaurants. Like attracts like. They don't so much compete with as support each other by bringing business to the neighbourhood thanks to an attractive critical mass. But not all restaurant rows are created equal.

Baldwin Street, for example, is gloriously funky, colourful and fun (an ideal tourist magnet). But save for the longest-running show on the block, the fabulous Yung Sing Pastry Shop (which has been selling superb Chinese takeout buns since 1968), there's not a whole lot worth eating on Baldwin Street. It's no more of an epicurean destination than the restaurant row on King Street West near the theatres, or Bloor Street west of Spadina. Quantity, yes. Quality, no.

But Harbord Street, which is blossoming into an interesting restaurant destination, is another story. Aside from the abysmal parking possibilities, Harbord Street from Spadina west to Major is emerging as a restaurant row to rival some of the best blocks in New York.

On the eastern end, by Spadina, the strip is anchored by the ever-splendid Splendido. Moving westward, you drop several notches on the snack bracket, which is easier on the wallet. Anchored in "dumbbell" fashion by the Boulevard Café at its western end at Borden Street, the strip is increasingly delicious. The yummy French Tati Bistro opened in 2007, and in late January, the Harbord Room.

I had no reason to be optimistic, since the restaurant's chef came from the Drake Hotel and the front-of-the-house partner came from Czehoski - neither is exactly a hotbed of gourmania or service. But something is very right at the Harbord Room. The interior has charm to spare. The walls are somewhere between deep pink and coral, a colour that flatters even those of us who remember the Vietnam War. The ceiling has been dropped and faux beams added for texture. Marble tables, some bar height, some regular, go nicely with the long beer list chalked on a blackboard, and the bevelled mirrors recall a hip London wine bar.

The restaurant is tiny and the servers warm and attentive. Soft rock from the 1970s plays. Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young with citrus-cured salmon and horseradish cream and fennel/radish salad? Have I died and gone to rock 'n' roll bistro heaven?

Other starters are equally salutary, and calibrated to ward off winter chill. Deep, rich lentil soup with braised lamb shank and goat-cheese cream is about as flavourful a soup as possible. Calamari, clams and chorizo is what happens when a downtown hipster meets Portuguese clams with pork. It's spicy, strong and crispy, with tender calamari and properly cooked fresh clams. Barely seared tuna sits pretty in a pool of saffron, chili and lime broth, and the Caesar salad is an impeccable under-dressed delight topped with oven-dried Niagara prosciutto, which is a cross between ham and a French fry, crispy pork meat being one of life's most divine acts of decadence.

Often, restaurants ace the apps and fail to give the mains the attention they deserve. But chef Cory Vitiello, who spent four years in the kitchen at Scaramouche before he went to the Drake, clearly learned a thing or two under the superlative Keith Froggett. His mains have as much snap, crackle and pop as his apps: Who would have imagined so much flavour could be packed into pumpkin risotto (thanks in part to pecorino, pine nuts and crisp sage leaves)?

Roast chicken breast rises to its best performance, moist and plump and crisp-skinned, with a marvellous white purée of Jerusalem artichokes (spiked with apple and vanilla) surrounded by a moat of deep brown foie gras sauce. Cute little house-made coarse sausage and buttery al dente Brussels sprouts make this the ultimate February food.

Chef majors in meat: Perfectly roasted pink lamb leg in its own jus is rich beyond one's wildest dreams thanks to cauliflower with a nutty brown butter benediction and buttery braised Swiss chard. Fresh al dente pappardelle are a carnivore's carnival, thanks to long-braised beef cheeks with winter greens and little house-made sourdough little nuggets of marrow with wild mushrooms in deep red wine sauce.

Clearly the chef plays favourites, because his desserts are mere pleasantries, save for the cloud-light goat cheesecake with crunchy cardamom streusel.

Chocolate bread pudding isn't chocolaty enough, its dulce de leche sauce has been thinned too much for punch, and caramelized pineapple tart suffers from a heavy crust and bland coconut ice cream.

But the bottom line is still delectable. Third time is a charm. The room that was Eduardo's for 2007 and before that Latitude has now got it very right.

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