

Cheese, wine and swine



By **Michael Philippi**
Ungaretti & Harris • Restaurant Critic

New Orleans has the Brennans — in fact my rule of thumb for novice visitors to the Crescent City is that if it is owned by a Brennan, go there — sort of like hearing a band with a Neville in it (as in Aaron, not Richard). We, however, have the Bannos, who, aided and abetted by Scott Harris of Mia Francesca fame, have now given us near porcine perfection in The Purple Pig.

The Purple Pig has gotten a lot of press lately, so we had to check it out. You should too. Inside is smaller than expected, with long, high communal butcher-block tables, a long wrap-around bar and a few perimeter tables for those who don't want to try to chance the tall chairs at the big tables or aren't feeling particularly communal.

The theme of cheese, wine and swine plays out in small dishes and a vast selection of fairly priced wines. This is the perfect place for that long, idle lunch or, since it is open late, slow-paced, unhurried summer nights. The Bannos' New Orleans (Heaven on Seven) soul together with Scott Harris' (a South Side boy at that) unique ability to serve fancy food without having to wear fancy pants make this place a must-go for the sit-long-talk-much-and-wash-down-great-food-with-great-wine crowd.

The menu is broken down in categories of antipasti, fried items, cured meats, smears, cheese and a la plancha, which I think means grilled stuff. There are also salads, but seriously, salads when crisp fried pig's ear is in the house? According to our server, who could describe each dish like he invented it, the idea is to start at antipasti and work your way around to the grilled stuff. Okay. Antipasti selections were fava beans mixed up with hard-boiled eggs and crisp prosciutto; shaved asparagus with pecorino noce and parmigiano reggiano; braised baby artichokes with fingerling potatoes, asiago and

salami; and olive oil-poached tuna with Greek lima beans. All four were served together in coffee mug-sized bowls on a plank. All were light and good, with the highest points going to the fava beans because of the generous and perfectly crisped prosciutto. The tuna was a little disappointing; someone must have left the poacher on a little too long because there wasn't a hint of pink in it. The asparagus appeared as thin, angled slices with little chunks of really good sharp cheese (good cheese — a pattern here). We regretted not trying the salt roasted beets or the pork fried almonds with rosemary and garlic, but, after all, this was only the antipasti.

Fried items included pig's ear with crispy kale for one. This came in crunchy strips sort of like cracklins only better served over a bed of that flash-fried greens topped with a fried egg. You don't usually expect to see deviled eggs on the fried menu, but the Pig's take on this picnic fare involves extracting the yolk, mixing it up with cheese and secret spices, reinjecting it, dusting the now-intact hard-boiled egg with bread crumbs and deep frying it. Take an extra Lipitor if you have to, but don't pass this one up.

With at least a dozen cheeses and half that many cured meats, this course could last hours at the outside tables on warm summer nights. We opted for jamon serrano and Catalonian fuet, which turned out to be a big plate of lean cured ham along with nice thick slices of very moist and tasty hard salami. The cheeses ranged from soft earthy brie in truffle tremor to a sharp parmigiano reggiano. So many fancy joints serve fine cured meats and cheeses as if they were diamonds — tiny little squares, meat shaved so fine that you have about 20 seconds to eat it before it's jerky. Not here. Nice-sized hunks of good-to-great cheese, oven-toasted

bread slices, with the only concession to fancy being delicious fig compote.

Smears come with that same great toast. We tried the pork neck bone rilette and mostarda, which is a little tub of chards of sweet neck meat cooked for a long time with enough renderings to make it a spread and with a sort of fruit mustard essence. The baked caciocavallo cheese and truffle oil was served piping hot.

Finally the main attraction: a la Plancha. As with the other courses, an overabundance of interesting options. We stayed basic with wagyu sirlon tip with charred asparagus, onions and peppers and chicken thigh kebabs with fried smashed potatoes and tzatziki. The wagyu was like wagyu always is, too rare for me but melt in your mouth. The thigh kebabs, however, may have changed my summer barbecues forever. Moist, deboned thigh meat with a crispy, salty skin on a kebab is way better than a boring chicken breast. The genius, however, is hard-frying mashed potatoes into patties and serving all of it over a bed of tzatziki, which is Greek cucumber sauce.

Don't forget dessert. No pork products here, but a really good fried brioche they call Sicilian iris — a fresh-baked ball of sugar-crust bread filled with ricotta and chocolate chip — lighter than it sounds and very good. A scoop of vanilla ice cream would improve it.

This place is already good; it is going to be great and a perfect summer lazy day spot. ■

Pleadings:

The Purple Pig
500 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago
(312) 464-1PIG (1744)

Court costs:

Antipasti: \$4 - \$8

Entrees: \$8 - \$14

Verdict: 

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