

column < Counsel's Table

Wake up, taste buds!



By Michael Philippi
Ungaretti & Harris • Restaurant Critic

So everybody has been told since we were little that we use only 10 percent of our brain. Truth or myth? No one can be sure, although my family will tell you that, for me at least, 10 percent is a goal, not a limitation. I can think of a few judges who seemed to have the same thought.

Given the fairly routine things we usually eat and the customary spices we use in our food, the same can probably be said about our taste buds. But like Uri Geller, who may have channeled that other 90 percent to bend spoons, all of us wannabe foodies keep true to the quixotic search for something, anything, to bring the rest of our taste buds to life.

Then we go to Vermilion and find foodie nirvana. Maneet Chauhan is the executive chef, and she is something. A lot of people have written about her and for good reason. I haven't been everywhere in Chicago, but I have been to a lot of places and nobody does what she does. Fearlessly she combines traditional Indian fare with South American staples like rich Brazilian seafood stews or Argentine-style chimichurri strip steak. The result is like nothing else in town, and no one who likes food should miss it. Vermilion is surprisingly quiet at lunchtime, and that is the chance for you to try it out. Don't be afraid.

Fearless, in the person of Chef Maneet, means more than mixing cumin and jalapeno and calling it fusion.

Fearless means going against Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto in an episode that aired on Easter. While many of us were recovering on the couch from too much lamb and candy, we could see one of the best chefs in town go against the Iron Chef himself with a secret ingredient of leeks. You know, leeks, that great staple of Indian cooking. She held her own against Morimoto.

The place itself is sleek and elegant. Low-slung couches, comfortable, well-spaced tables, flowing drapes, chic art — classy without being over the top. Great, small bar with inventive cocktails (or mocktails if you prefer the virgin variety).

This place is owned and run by women, and you can tell. By women, think Xena the food warrior, not Daisy Duke. The food here is power, but the kindness, patience and knowledge of the wait staff and chefs eliminate any sense of intimidation. Meals here are playful, interesting and, most of all, delicious. We figured we were in for something special when the amuse bouche of cauliflower white chocolate soup came. This was not going to be your momma's meatloaf meal. Start with a selection of what are billed as "Indian-Latin tapas." We had the blue corn crusted scallops, duck vindaloo arepa, artichoke pakoras and juhu ki pani puri. Stop reading if you had this last night at home.

The scallops were warm and tender with a little salt from a goat cheese puree, but just enough. The duck was shredded and richly fragrant, simmered in a ton of spices, many of which I couldn't identify but well-influenced with coriander, cardamom, chilies and cinnamon. Artichokes were little fritters with an eggplant chili and coconut sauce and the jukuki was an amazing little crisp flour shell full of refreshing and taste bud-rejuvenating mint water. We couldn't pass on the tandoori lamb chops, which were beautifully presented lolly-pop chops, but were so well-spiced that we wished we had saved some of that juhu ki-soothing balm for the bite after. The small dishes left us with most of the ordinarily dormant 90 percent taste buds at full alert. Normally I think that sorbet between courses is a silly, but some after this would have been

welcomed. After much discussion with our servers we opted for caldeirada de peixe, a classic seafood stew, more paella-like than Indian but, wait for it, the tomato-based broth sits for a minute and, to coin some other chef's phrase — "BAM!" — there is the spice.

I've had the chili-glazed blackened tamarind ribs before, and I didn't forget about them. Meaty, fall-off-the-bone tender. The tamarind gives it the citrus glaze that holds in the heat of the chili and Indian spice that is blackened into the meat. Under the "Indian Truck Stop" section of the menu we chose pindi butter chicken, which was a nice contrast to the heat of the ribs. It was bite-sized chunks of white meat slow-cooked in a creamy and mildly spiced tomato-based gravy.

You would think that dessert in a place like this would be suspect. You would be wrong. Mango flan was cream cheese-like custard served with medallions of sliced mango in a cooling sauce. It did come with a little trail of red peppercorns, which were pretty, but there was no need to eat them. Coriander pumpkin bread pudding was warm, spiced comfort food. The ice cream trio included strawberry pepper and whole roasted cumin seed — neither of which you can get at Baskin-Robbins — but they were a bit out there on the flavor challenge scale. All was forgiven, though, with one bite of the burnt caramel pear, which was sweet, smooth and oh so cool. ■

Pleadings:

Vermilion
10 W. Hubbard St., Chicago
(312) 527-4060

Court costs:

Tapas: \$8-\$12
Entrees: \$24-\$33

Verdict:



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