

Grille Chef Lights a Fire

By Eve Zibart
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 Friday, January 20, 2006; WE19

A little attention goes a long way -- in both directions.

It's understandably difficult for a chef to keep his energy high when a restaurant isn't getting much buzz, and equally understandable that during Restaurant Week, when dining rooms are more crowded (and customers are being wooed for repeat business), both food and service would be raised to a higher level.

So it's not surprising that last week's dinners at Dupont Grille were the best it had yet served up. Good timing, too, because this kitchen-in-transition needs just a little more time to make its way to the finish line.

This is partly because chef Duane Keller, ex- of Potowmack Landing, the Ashby Inn and Reston's Market Street Grill, among others, has been cautiously shifting from his predecessor's menu (which has to take some blame for the restaurant's lukewarm following) to his own. Opening chef Cornell Coulon was a protege of Emeril's, hence the restaurant's lingering New Orleans flavors; and to his credit, Keller has given Coulon's concepts a fair trial, though with mixed results. He has been turning out admirably crisp but just-stiffened fried oysters, for one, though gumbo of the day is something a crapshoot. (Note to all those gumbo makers in town: If fresh okra is not available, grab the frozen; canned is tasteless.)

Fried wontons stuffed with truffle-scented potatoes and sprinkled with Parmesan is a cutesy idea (another Emeril hand-me-down, perhaps), but offered more aroma than taste. Vanilla-rubbed duck breast and confit leg were good, but the swamp of sweet cherry sauce entirely overwhelmed the vanilla, and the wild-mushroom Port Salut bread pudding that was its sidecar was a sheer brick and couldn't have testified to either fungus or cheese. Pepper-seared halibut over a pearl onion-watercress-baby shrimp "relish" with citrus vinaigrette went flat, the fish too dry, the shrimp tinny and the vinaigrette almost untraceable. And there is a tendency to over-salt, definitely a New Orleans hangover. It seems likely that Keller is having to redirect his line staff as well as his menu.

But other problems at the restaurant reflect the trendy emphasis on form over function, about which a kitchen can do only so much. Dupont Grille, which runs along the 19th Street side of Jury's Washington Hotel, is striking in a retro sort of way -- from outside it looks like a modernist take on an Edward Hopper painting of a diner, with the light pouring out through its glass walls; severe, blocky decor and central bar with stools -- but it's rather more striking than comfortable. The booths and tables are at 90-degree angles (and that includes the booths' emphatically upright backs), which makes walking through weirdly roundabout and puts conversations at odds. (It also seems to squeeze the waiters, who have to circumvent one another.) It's technically wheelchair-accessible, but not wheelchair-friendly (the private room may be more so), and the bathrooms are around and down the hall at the rear of the lobby. And having the maitre d' out in the hotel lobby as well, past the restaurant entrance near Biddu Mulligan's pub, can be confusing.

The service definitely needs rethinking, too. Spoons are not part of the setups, even though many dishes come with great pools of sauce. (If you like a sauce you might want more; if you don't, you need something to lift out your food.) A foursome that ordered several appetizers to share had to request small plates and never received any serving utensils.

One of the best dishes on the menu, the crispy whole rockfish, was beautifully crafted, served upright on its side and with the outer curve of meat scored for cutting free, but it was presented on a plate so small it barely held the fish -- much less the flourish of mussels around the base -- and without a fish knife, the customer was all but stymied. Nor did the waiter, who walked by several times, inquire why she wasn't eating. (Okay, so fish knives are old-fashioned, but a few could be kept on hand, or something like a butter knife offered in its place.) Bread plates might be cleared between courses. Customers aren't always consulted about the preferred doneness of orders.

Keller shows best -- always has -- when he sticks to three or four big flavors, and several of the dishes sound more like him. Pan-fried grouper, paired with couscous and smoked tomato sauce, was much more satisfying than the halibut. Pork chops were well seasoned and cooked, the cheese grits first-rate and the lightly bitter broccoli rabe nudged, if didn't actually fight, the mushroom broth. And in that case, the garnish filip, fried parsnip chips scattered on the top, provided a clever rooty echo to the mushrooms below.

The rockfish and the oysters were fine, as noted, and the calamari, which are battered in a lighter, tempura-style coating, admirably dry. Prosciutto-wrapped tuna is a generous serving, and though the concept of a beef-based sauce with ham and fish seems odd, it served the admirable black beluga lentils well (the over-blanching ham, on the other hand, added little). And the rice-crust eggplant napoleon, with fennel, tomatoes and those good lentils, is a smart rethinking of Mediterranean flavors.

Keller expects to have his own menus in place in early February. His style should be a good match for the decor -- bold but not too busy -- and maybe he can push for a more customer-friendly floor plan. "Walk-in traffic" isn't just a phrase, it's an ambition.

*Dupont Grille 1500 New Hampshire Ave. NW (in the Jury's Washington Hotel), entrance on 19th Street NW Metro: Dupont Circle Phone: 202-939-9596
 Kitchen hours: Open Monday-Friday 6:30-11, 11:30-2:30 and 5:30-10; Friday and Saturdays 6:30-11, 11:30-5 and 5:30-11; Sundays 7-2:30 and 5-10 Dinner prices: Appetizers \$6-\$11; entrees \$12-\$28 Wheelchair access: Fair*

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