



dallasnews SportsDay GuideLIVE FD Luxe neighborsgo

Sign In Subscribe Subscriber Services

OBITS CLASSIFIEDS AUTOS JOBS REAL ESTATE SHOPPING

GuideLIVE DINING

Powered by The Dallas Morning News

DINING MOVIES MUSIC ARTS THINGS TO DO TV WHATEVER COMICS & GAMES

81°  

FORECAST TRAFFIC

Restaurant review: Driftwood dazzles with its lovely dining room, affordable menu ★★★★★

By LESLIE BRENNER

Restaurant Critic

lbrenner@dallasnews.com

Published: 27 June 2012 04:51 PM

Updated: 28 June 2012 02:52 PM

Delicate curls of thin-sliced, raw sockeye salmon belly stained a deep rosy color come with a garnish of tiny-diced jicama and kumquats. The salmon's been lightly cured with grapefruit juice and zest, beet juice and pink peppercorns, and the crudo is unexpectedly lively, silky, intense.

A tender nest of black-pepper linguine laced with ribbons of shaved asparagus, bits of Serrano ham and roasted pearl onions is topped with two lobes of sea-urchin roe. Pull up a forkful of pasta, making sure to pick up a bit of uni along the way, and taste. There's a luxurious wash of rich, oceanic flavor that can't be explained by those lobes alone. Of course: The noodles are bathed in a sauce of puréed uni, egg yolks, white wine, fish fumet. It's sea urchin bliss.

Omar Flores, chef at Driftwood, a 2 1/2-month-old seafood-focused restaurant in Oak Cliff, is bursting with well-imagined dishes like these — so much so that his menu can't even contain them. The crudo and uni pasta were recent specials.

He sautés whelks — sea snails that live in madcap, conical shells — in butter boosted with lemon grass, ginger, kaffir lime, Thai basil and chiles, finishes their sauce with white wine and fumet, tucks them back in their shells and presents them with a slash of cilantro pistou. Drag a whelk through the brilliant green pistou, raise fork to mouth and taste. You'll never crave canned escargots in garlic butter again.

But don't go looking for the whelks; that dish, too, was a special.

Fresh off an almost three-year stint running Abacus as executive sous-chef, Flores has unleashed his creativity at this small, intimate neighborhood restaurant that seems the perfect venue for his talents.

The lovely dining room has a breezy, casual, drop-by-anytime feel, done in muted blue-greens and natural woods. Striking sculptures fashioned from driftwood hang on one wall; starfish, urchins and sand dollars creep up another. A lattice of wood frames an inviting, open-air patio.

It's a dream of a neighborhood restaurant (and affordable — main courses are \$22 to \$26), brought to fruition by owner Jonn Baudoin, who also runs the dining room. Every detail (with the possible exception of the simple wooden dining chairs) feels right, including the seamless service that's warm and attentive but doesn't overreach. You might recognize Baudoin: He was general manager at Ristorante Nicola, and before that at Dallas Fish Market.

So, what about the actual menu?

Crudos and shellfish lead the parade. You might start with Naked Cowboy oysters on the half-shell; they're wild ones from Long Island, N.Y., each bathed in a zippy Rio Red grapefruit mignonette and finished with a puff of Champagne foam. All over town, chefs are dousing oysters in mignonette sauce, and rarely does it improve the oyster; here it's a happy marriage.

A hamachi crudo, thick slabs of yellowtail, dressed simply in Key lime oil, Key lime zest and olive oil and set on chunks of charred pineapple, was sent out with crushed macadamia nuts, toasted ground coconut, threads of mint and a drizzle of lime oil. The pineapple threatened to overwhelm the delicate fish; a thinner slab may have been advisable. Still, it was quite nice.

Among the main courses, I loved "tongue and cheek": tender, floppy agnolotti filled with beef tongue, topped with a carefully grilled yellowtail cheek and set off by a smooth asparagus purée. What a deliciously funny surf 'n' turf. On other plates, beautifully chargrilled octopus tentacles wound around marble potatoes, manzanilla olives and pickled onions, all set off by a lustrous smoked tomato vinaigrette; big gulf shrimp crowned with puffs of lobster froth ruled over crisp-edged polenta and a sauté of speckled butter beans and chorizo.

It's easy to ruin wild salmon on a grill, but Flores sent it out slippery and just barely translucent in the middle, perfect. The portion looked small, but the fish was so rewardingly rich it satisfied (and then some), paired with a long-stemmed artichoke crown and a warm salad of tiny-diced carrot, roasted cippolini, fava beans, green garlic and pickled ramps in a vanilla-artichoke vinaigrette: an amped-up barigoule.

Let you be tempted to think it's all about seafood here, think again. A rabbit duo was one of the best dishes I sampled, the loin stuffed with herbs, wrapped in caulfat and cooked sous vide, then enrobed in a thin layer of bacon and crisped. The leg, for its part, was expertly confitted. And chicken poached in milk perfumed with

thyme and garlic was a super-tender, flavorful knockout, its skin beautifully crisped. It came to the table graced with a light oyster mushroom pan sauce, oyster mushrooms and farro (a nutty-flavored grain) done risotto-style.

Not everything succeeded — shrimp and ricotta-filled fried zucchini blossoms weren't quite crisp; a terrific lobster salad balanced on a cakey, sweetish bun was less charming than a straight-ahead lobster roll.

And while the one-page wine list delivers in the whites column, it could use a few more compelling light reds.

As far as sweets go, the menu offers three. Crème brûlée is made interesting by layers of orange caramel and cajeta whipped cream. Send your spoon to the bottom of the French canning jar it rides in on. Turns out it's more than interesting; it's irresistible. There's also an almond-crusted buckle bursting with Texas blueberries, set on a fat stripe of sour cherry-brown butter sauce. It's topped with a scoop of wonderful house-made ice cream with the barest whisper of olive oil. And finally, there's a dark chocolate terrine, sleek, glossy and sophisticated enough to be served in the swankiest white-tablecloth joint in town. That comes with excellent pistachio gelato. All are outstanding.

Are you sitting down? Flores serves as pastry chef, too.

"Our goal is to be the best seafood house in Texas," owner Baudoin told me recently in a phone interview.

So far, I have to say, so good.

Driftwood (4-stars)

Price: \$\$\$ (appetizers and salads \$8 to \$15, main courses \$22 to \$26, desserts \$7 to \$8)

Service: Warm and attentive, but without overreaching

Ambience: A lovely, intimate neighborhood spot, casual yet polished, with a breezy, seaside feel and an inviting, open-air patio.

Location: 642 W. Davis St., Dallas; 214-942-2530; driftwood-dallas.com

Hours: Tuesday-Saturday 5 to 10 p.m.

Credit cards: All major

Wheelchair accessible: Yes

Smoking area: None

Alcohol: Full bar. A one-page wine list that draws on regions around the world delivers on the white-wines side but could use a few more interesting light reds. There are plenty of choices under \$50 per bottle, and 18 (including two sakes) available by the glass as well.

Did you see something wrong in this story, or something missing? Let us know.