



Come for the wine, stay for food

By Nicholas Boer - July 20, 2006

My first walk through Epicurious Garden - flush with gleaming sushi, architectural chocolates, savory soups and homely chickpea pizzas - was restorative. Here was an antidote to modernity. Here was God's food court.

So on Saturday, when I showed up at Taste, the center's only sit-down restaurant, I was already an enthusiast.

And here was a foodie's ultimate dream: climate-controlled, hand-picked wine selections available at the push of a button. After three (or was it five?) tastes, I was as bubbly as Greg Estes, the wine director/kid in a candy store, who ran - he did run, didn't he? - over to me and my dinner guests when he spied us puzzling over the delivery system.

When we returned to our seats, our menus had vanished, an example of how Taste trips over itself now and then. It will ultimately be the customers who force a personality on this modern, chicken-roasting, drop-in-for-a-fine-meal restaurant/wine shop. For now, it's enough to be part of the show - and let evolution take care of itself.

Two-foot-long white plates encourage a certain style, and chef Garret Martindale, looking like an admiral on a rowboat in the tiny kitchen, uses them to full effect. Grilled White Asparagus (\$10): to the left, a sunny egg; front and center, stacks of stalks lashed on the grill; to the right, almost missed, a creamy spoonful of creamy hollandaise, coarsened with mustard seed. My companion detects anise and we find a couple of tiny leaves of tarragon. Hey, this is fun!

- Duck Confit Salad (\$10) should be a theme park ride called Extreme Texture! Crispy shards of duck, like refined carnitas, against pillows of goat cheese. Bitter greens and a delicate quarter of coifed artichoke. Tiny huckleberries, exploding like plutonium.
- Sauteed Maine Peeky Toe Crab Cakes (\$13) are bread-free - they're not even coated with crumbs, and seem to be bound more by pressure than mayonnaise. Hints of cilantro and a rich ragout of avocado, corn and smoky tomatoes lend a fashionable Latino flavor.
- Torchon de Foie Gras (\$17), a thick slice from a hazelnut-coated roulade, is a French tour de force but just three airy toast points force me - oh, dear - to weigh my crostini to the breaking point. The terrine is cold, too cold to fully appreciate the flavor, but I can't wait. Two assertive side notes - huckleberries and frisee tossed with an impressively fragrant truffle oil - animate the fatty duck roll out of its slumber.
- Entrees are just as cerebral. The chicken dish (\$14) - half an organic bird sweetly basted with hoisin on the rotisserie - reminds me of a deconstructed paella. Lardons of bacon. A few black mussels. A smoky whole peeled tomato adding color and depth. It's a gutsy presentation -- brave and brawny.
- The winning entree, Berkshire "Kurobota" Pork Chop (\$24), is a celebration of Brentwood corn. Grilled kernels fill up one corner of the plate and a corn fondue, tasting like fresh polenta, sweetly sauces the juicy grilled chop. The pork tastes like pork, not like salt and smoke.
- Crispy Skin Striped Bass (\$22) shows Martindale's range. Served in a bowl with clams and a clean-tasting broth, the dish has a delicate Asian sensibility. Pearl onions and tender pea shoots are as naked as a haiku.

Through all this food, we've had some wonderful wine revelations. Estes directed us to the Robert Sinskey Vin Gris of Pinot Noir, a beautifully perfumed rose ("great with salmon"). He also suggested a comparison of two pinot noirs from the same vineyard -- one a first pressing that was impossibly delicate (and also impossible to get; it was the last bottle of the one case Estes could get his hands on).

It's no wonder Estes is having such a good time. In addition to the 36 wines available at the pods (which cost some US\$90,000 just to install), there's a fantastic by-the-glass list, showcasing familiar varietals from obscure wineries at affordable prices (\$4.75-\$8.75). If you want to take a class on wine, I would suggest paying your tuition here. With its retail license, Taste offers some 200 bottles, so if you discover something special, you can take a bottle (or six) home and do some research.

All these options can be rather bewildering, and not everyone will want to hop up in between bites to search for another 1-ounce taste (though, of course, you can always press that button twice), but that will change as the clientele becomes more familiar with the new technology.

Owner Deepak Aggarwal has quite a nose for the restaurant business. He is co-owner of several Indian restaurants called Khana Peena and is opening a French restaurant, called Le Bistro Elephant, next week on Oxford in Berkeley. He spends most nights on the floor in the background, ready to lend guidance when he senses confusion.

But we navigated the system without wasting too much time or money, and we finished fully embracing the concept. I must have tried 10 wines and still remember a couple of them, and my companion left, not fully sated, with a bottle under his arm.