

New chef adds some substance to Drake's style

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September 9, 2006

The Drake Hotel

1150 Queen St. W., Toronto, 416-531-5042. Dinner for two with wine, tax and tip, \$125.

Oh, to be a creature of the night. Not to be fettered by having to be perky before 8 a.m., greeting the children's day with maternal bonhomie and something better than peanut butter and jam sandwiches for school lunch. Then on to work with the ravages of time carefully camouflaged with expensive clothes and overpriced cosmetics.

No, there is none of that for the creature of the night, who parties often and late, *sans* crepey neck, crow's feet and middle-age spread. The lissome creature drops into the Drake for a drink in the ground-floor dark 'n' cozy bar, or goes upstairs to the open-air roof bar where the smokers chill. I tried to check it out once just for 10 minutes, but so clearly was I not the bar type that they made me give up my cellphone as ransom, to ensure I left quickly.

The Drake's two bars are pretty much always packed with thirtysomethings of the downtown persuasion -- tight black clothes, generous servings of firm cleavage on the gals and \$300 jeans on the guys. The film festival swells the crowd to feverish proportions, thanks to the Drake's over-the-top street cred as a hip hangout.

Getting past the bouncer at the foot of the silver mesh staircase leading to the roof bar can be almost impossible; some Queen Street types eat first in the dining room and count on their server to work the bar angle. Unfortunately, the dining area is bordered by that staircase and the bar, which makes its noise level inimical to civilized conversation. But one does not go to the Drake for conversation. One goes to be cool and to meet others of similar persuasion.

Which makes the food not irrelevant, but less urgent. Take, for example, the sushi, which feeds adequately but should not give Hiro any cause for concern. Spicy salmon roll with shiso leaf and Dungeness roll with smoked salmon (called gravlax though it's not) on the outside are both moderately pleasing, on the level of Bloor Street sushi joints. More creative are big squares of raw tuna clad in nori atop a "log cabin" of raw asparagus: indelicate but fun in this setting, especially when consumed with clever cocktails.

Despite hiring a snazzy new chef -- Anthony Rose, whose pedigree includes stints working for such luminaries as California's Bradley Ogden and New York's Jean-Georges Vongerichten -- the Drake has no intention of blowing the big boys out of the water, gastronomically speaking. (Surely they watched Lobby try that last spring and fall on its face.) The bar crowd doesn't want haute cuisine, and serious foodies hate the bar scene.

Here, cleverly, owner Jeff Stober is opting for comfort food done well. Witness the list of mains: roast chicken, roast pork, salade niçoise and the like.

Chef Rose aims for seasonal jollies with a trilogy of tomato plates. Alas, the heirloom tomatoes in the salad -- a multicoloured compilation of green, yellow, coral and red -- have perhaps been in the fridge. Heirloom tomatoes, from seed grown for taste (as opposed to round, red, truck-friendly uniformity), tend toward deep, juicy sweetness. But put a tomato in the fridge (as most restaurants must do) and its persona shrinks to a pale shadow, kin to the truck-ripened tomato: All show, no go.

The second tomato in the trilogy is onion tart with beefsteak tomato. The crust is uber-buttery and flaky (exuding grease) and the onions are properly caramelized: The effect is charming though heavy.

Tomato take three is fried green tomatoes. Ever since the book *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* (and the movie based on it), I have cherished a sentimental attachment, unsupported by taste, for fried green tomatoes. This rendition is the usual deep-fried crunchy kissin' cousin to fast food, made more interesting by a zingy remoulade sauce.

Big exuberant flavours are Rose's signature -- ideal bar food. The huge hunk of Quebec pork chop is perfectly cooked and happily married to a stew of tiny wild mushrooms and grilled peaches wrapped in salty bacon. Chicken has been marinated Latin-style in vinegar, nicely roasted, and jazzed with sweet/spicy pepper salsa. Parmesan-spiked gnocchi have the heft of cannonballs, but nobody said this was North 44. It's more a bistro than a high-end resto. Salade niçoise is at its best, thanks to fresh tuna drizzled with mustardy vinaigrette with a perfectly poached egg atop green and yellow beans with smashed new potatoes.

Save for the leaden gnocchi, the kitchen's sole unforgivable error is overcooked black cod with basmati rice that is both greasy and dry and not much helped by shreds of dried-out Peking duck. Fresh fries with chipotle mayo go far to heal the hurt.

If fine dining were the Drake's goal, there wouldn't be bouncers at the doors and that pulsating backbeat from the DJ. Where before its culinary output was erratic and not always pleasant, its current kitchen is right on the mark for the habitat, just like the signature cocktails they're serving. The "pink lemonade" has neither fresh raspberries nor lemon zing, but it's sweet and fun. Just like a night at the Drake.

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