

Are You a Chicago Foodie?

December 09, 2009

Ria and Balsan at the Elysian Hotel



After months of anticipation, delays and rumors, the Elysian Hotel finally unveils two new restaurants this week. Ria is an upscale dinner-only concept with a focus on seafood, while sister restaurant Balsan is more casual, featuring a raw bar, wood-fired oven pizzas and housemade charcuterie. Both restaurants are on the third floor of the sparkling (literally) new Elysian Hotel, whose elegant European courtyard entrance is worth a detour by itself. Executive Chef Jason McLeod leads the helm for both restaurants, and has ample amounts of luxury hotel experience under his toque from San Diego's Grand Del Mar resort and Four Seasons. He is also wont to walking around with a cast-iron skillet of sizzling sausages. The rich, meaty smell was making heads swivel like a turntable.

So, were the restaurants worth the wait? Are hotels finally shedding their reputation for overpriced, stodgy dining and leading the way with [revolutionary new restaurants](#)? I dropped by the media preview on Monday night to check out the action.

Ria features a sophisticated, posh atmosphere with elegant greys, greens and golds to liven the room. Like the fabled Elysian fields, the walls glitter with gold and silk coverings. Sommelier Daniel Pilkey has put together a well-thought out selection of champagnes and sparkling wines, which are presented to you on a rolling cart.

As I sank into a leather armchair, it was mentioned that for CEO David Pisnor, blood is indeed thicker than water. More specifically, he is the nephew of organic revolution doyenne [Alice Waters](#). I did a bit of a double-take. "It's true," Pisnor beamed. "I worked at Chez Panisse for six years, and spent months in the beginning cleaning the dirt off carrots. And after that, I was finally promoted to the peaches!" You will therefore not be surprised to learn that the restaurants are committed to using local and artisanal ingredients, with meats and seafood from sustainable sources. Also, be on the lookout for Waters' next book release party; she will be in town for Rial. (Cue [instant rimshot](#).)



Throughout the evening, tasting portions of menu items were available for sample. The first course featured matsutake mushrooms with hot ponzu broth poured over the top, alongside a delicate mouthful of fish, baby radishes and microgreens. In keeping with the style of Japanese cuisine, the earthy mushroom flavor was austere and intense.



This Bouchot mussel is surrounded by a puree of fingerling potatoes, huitlacoche, pickled celery and freeze-dried corn. As I scooped the disparate elements into my mouth, they melded congenially into a familiar New England tradition. Essentially, the dish is clam chowder deconstructed.

Across the hall, Balsan is a sleek alternative that sports a more laid-back vibe, with a broad marble bartop to focus your attention. The restaurant serves three meals a day, along with a weekend brunch. The menu features a variety of small plates with charcuterie and cheese, a raw oyster bar, and large plates with everything from a burger to cauliflower risotto. The kitchen boasts the city's only wood-burning oven in a hotel, which lends itself to pizzas and flatbreads.



Seared duck breast (\$25) is offered as a large plate, over a parsnip purée, pickled quince, mixed greens and spice jus. The incredible richness of the duck pairs nicely with the vinaigrette on the greens.



Currently, there are two primary pizzas (\$15) on Balsan's menu: a margherita pizza featuring burrata, tomato and basil, and a tarte flambée, topped with bacon, red onion and Uplands Pleasant Ridge Reserve cheese. A slice of the latter is pictured above, alongside the veal heart salad, with pear and shaved manchego. The pizza arrived piping hot, with a crisp, paper-thin crust and rich, smoky bacon. A third pizza, titled "Chicken for 2," is available at dinner and features an intriguing combination of pancetta, sunchoke, pickled onion and brussel sprouts.



From the raw bar, the kampachi offers a light, refreshing alternative to richer dishes. This plate is dressed with an orange segment, microgreens and radish slices.



The juniper sausage returns here post-slicing as the star attraction, over a bed of grits and spigarello, with a piece of airy crackling for crunch. The braised spigarello was a terrific choice of winter greens, hearty and robust, and most importantly, not mushy.



This dessert of Torrone gelato, limoncello and almond crumbles is offered on the Ria menu. For something even more novel, check out the ash-baked apples, which are tucked into the wood-burning oven and charred whole. Afterwards, the exterior is peeled off and the baked apple is dressed with caramel and peanut in an ode to the classic caramel apple.

Ria and Balsan open on Wednesday, December 9th. They should be exciting additions to the Gold Coast restaurant scene.

[Ria and Balsan](#)

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