

NUVO Newsweekly
Posted on January 7, 2009 by Jennifer Litz

Taste's once weekly dinner venture is worth six days' anticipation

Whatever you thought Taste Café on College Avenue might be like for dinner, you're still not totally prepared for the reality. It had potential to be as laid-back and economically priced as the lunch staple, but it's also turned out to be a formidable spot for fine dining.

Last Wednesday's vibe was actually a bit more speakeasy. Taste has been open for dinner, quasi-officially, for the last few Wednesdays, for a meal program called "Aftertaste." The tables were mostly populated with friends and family of owner-chefs Deidra Henry and Marc Urwand, and die-hard Taste diners and foodies, many of whom have been coming to this one-night deal as a rule since it opened.

It's not hard to see why. Taste's warmly colored (if wonkily spaced) innards with innovative textures play well in a dimmer setting. The communal table quickly takes on a more cosmopolitan feel, especially with the über-functional light bulb fixtures hanging naked overhead. The daytime ordering line has been turned into a bar, where patrons order from a decent beer and wine list.

We had the 2005 Cherry Hill Winery Pinot Noir, a light red from Oregon's Willamette Valley. Cherry Hill's Web site lists it at \$29, other stores in the teens; we got it for over \$50. The list seems to push the American vineyards.

You're going to need a glass of wine, because courses come out at a leisurely pace. My first was Camembert en croute (\$8), with "apricot, cranberry, pecans," though I don't remember the cranberry, and golden raisins came in place of apricots. It was scrumptious. That perfectly flaky crust shedding from the unctuous, slightly bitter soft cheese, punctuated with the slight sweetness and texture from the nuts and fruit. Thinly sliced crostini of a light and dark variety held much more than their thin, crisp visages suggested.

A refined couple had given this to their toddler to eat. Maybe it is that accessible.

Many of Taste's daily salads are available on their dinner menu as well. I had a few bites of the beet salad (\$7) with goat cheese and a peppery, barely perceptible citrus vinaigrette. Everything was perfectly crisp and brilliantly hued, down to the bright yellows and deep reds of the firm, fresh beets.

If anything among our starters gave me slight pause, it was the Genoa salami tartine (\$11) with banana peppers, olive tapenade and pecorino pepato cheese. The firm but pliable crust couldn't have been more perfect. Still, I would have liked an additional ingredient to balance the other ingredients' naturally salty edges.

By this time, I was quite full from eating a whole disc of Camembert and drinking loads of that heavenly cucumber water presented in Trader's Point Creamery jugs. (Why would you buy anything bottled? But they do also have Panna and Pellegrino.) The jumbo shrimp chimichurri (\$15) wouldn't take up too much more real estate in my stomach. I almost felt these four cilantro-covered shrimp were more trouble than they're worth with the shells still on. And the outside spicings didn't amount to a terribly flavorful chimichurri. But even though it might be one of Aftertaste's least impressive main dishes, it was still good.

I much preferred my friend's richly flavored braised short ribs with an Asian inspired balsamic sauce (\$18). Even the presentation was awe-inspiring - a single rib blooms out of a small but deep plate of meat, foreshadowing the apex of its taste. A side of creamy, caramelized, complex cauliflower gratin (\$6) could convert even the staunchest carnivore.

And then came dessert. I suppose I threw a poorly veiled critic tantrum when it came time to negotiate the choice with my co-diners, because I found them mocking my proscription: "nothing with fruit, which the restaurant doesn't make."

Really, I had just been trying to avoid the table nominee, Nutella on crostini with fresh strawberries. I don't care for the chocolate-hazelnut spread. We settled on pumpkin crème brûlée (\$6.50), extremely well spiced and with a thoughtful candied pumpkin seed touch. It hadn't fully set, but it was still delicious.

And then the Nutella dessert floated past us, its neat presentation in two panini-inspired triangles defying the clumsy dish I had imagined. My tablemates glared at me.

But then, that's how it goes at Aftertaste. Every perfectly assembled dish is a shot of food porn, paraded in front of a small gathering of gastronomes. In fact, I can't wait to sink my teeth into the glistening roasted chorizo (\$12) I caught a glimpse of before my departure.

Aftertaste at Taste Cafe
5164 N. College Ave.
317-925-2233
Wednesdays, 6-9 p.m.

Food: 4.5
Atmosphere: 4.5
Service: 4.5