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## Dinner dazzles in the ROM Crystal

By Joanne Kates

The perennial museum dining problems are streetside recognition and ease of access, and the ROM's new opus fails at both. Confusing outdoor signage and a dark hall leading to an ugly small elevator are not the requisite foreplay for a \$300-a-couple extravaganza meal at C5 on the fifth floor of the Crystal.

But once at the top, all is well. A spectacular view south and west lays out the CN and lesser towers against the genteel backdrop of the University of Toronto's Gothic spires. The big sky, ever changing, is the star of the show at C5. From pale blue at cocktail hour through pink and coral at sunset, to deep blue dusk at dessert, the restaurant's decor is a parade of changing light. The room itself is almost as magnificent as the sky: two great glass walls punctuated by black girders and white columns, all at angles. Without blinds or curtains, the only glitch is the sun, which at dinnertime strikes diners' faces hard, so that at least a third of them have to don sunglasses.

It would be easy to have a jingoistic response to the ROM's choice of captains for this culinary ship. It's being run as a co-production by Restaurant Associates and Compass Canada. Compass is the largest food-service company in the world. Restaurant Associates, a partly independent subsidiary of Compass, operates high-end restaurants in museums and similar venues. The ROM went to Compass after Jamie Kennedy turned them down, and it became clear that no local company had the depth to do the job. Catering for 4,000 and wrangling a 350-seat cafeteria wasn't Kennedy's thing, but he checked out Compass and Restaurant Associates for the ROM and liked the choice.

And what's not to like? Compass hired Toronto chef Teddy Corrado, who worked as sous-chef at Zoom, George and Rain restaurants and as chef at Luce. Corrado's menu is deceptively simple; it's clear that he learned well from the big, clean flavours of Lorenzo Loseto (chef at Zoom and George) and the Rubino brothers (Rain, Zoom, Luce).

His best starter is a seemingly easy pasta: perfect pappardelle with tiny fresh favas and morels, sweet chewy duck prosciutto, and an enchantment of melt-in-the-mouth parmiggiano foam. His Dungeness crab salad is sweet and fresh; its vinaigrette gets a kick from the flavour of black olives. Also smart is setting otherwise tired mozzarella di buffalo salad in a sea of smoked yellow tomato gazpacho.

But we're confused by the middle course on offer. Is the lobster tail an app or a main? Well, says the waiter, "It could be..." Call me old-fashioned, but I like to know up front whether that \$22 foie gras is a prelude or the main event. It is, however, close to dangerous divinity, thanks to a sweet/tart cherry reduction that marries happily with the silken liver and earthy buckwheat shiitake ravioli. And what a

stroke of culinary cleverness to match the sweetness of seared scallops with the nutty delicacy of shaved Gruyère and fennel. Setting a deep-fried panko-crusted egg atop a lobster tail that has been richly infused with olive oil and telling us to break it to make the "sauce" was also a good idea. But next time cook the egg less, please, so that the yolk runs.

Corrado's main courses are loyal to the flavours he learned from his mentors. His lamb is superb - big ruby chops, fork-tender, generously crusted with duxelles (mushroom/onion sauté) - and the scent of the earth in morel jus. He gilds my lily atop black cod with bright yellow, thick, buttery hollandaise sauce with a rich lobster undercurrent. For the final kill, he adds sweet lobster and lentil salad and his trademark "stained white asparagus," meaning it has been cooked with balsamic vinegar.

This is not the uber-sophisticated cooking of a Claudio Aprile (Colborne Lane). Despite the occasional foam, Corrado's roots are in his inherited bold Italian flavours rather than the minutiae of molecular gastronomy. As in his squab: Perfectly cooked blood-red breast comes with tender leg confit in harmony with apricot chutney.

Concerning desserts, chef has a big idea built on small explorations of a strawberry theme. On a long white rectangular plate are: rum baba topped with strawberry-infused whipped cream and thin strawberry-scented meringue wafers; a tiny cube of excellent fresh strawberry sorbet scented with icewine; a small pile of chopped, sweetened strawberries topped with miniature tuile; and - the crème de la crème - a miniature mojito, its tiny glass salt- and sugar-encrusted, with a dollop of melting strawberry sorbet turning it pink as we watch. A strawberry sensation.

C5 is open every day for lunch, and only Thursday through Saturday for dinner. Lunch is disappointing. Could Corrado be leaving the lunch shift to his juniors? What other explanation is possible for the less-than-stellar technique at lunchtime? Our grilled octopus was tender, but its seasoning unexciting. Chicken breast was overcooked, as was snapper, and the yuzu foam on the scallops was so sour as to pucker the mouth. A calamari sandwich with green salsa is a grand idea, but the calamari was rubbery and the salsa flat.

Despite protests to the contrary, the ROM, Compass and RA all have to know that, even with its great dinners, C5 is not destined to make its living as a "normal" restaurant. As with other ambitious museum restaurants, it will anchor the museum's food-service program, sell a lot of lunches to bused-in culture vultures from Cleveland and be a helluva place for a party most nights.



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