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STAY / DINING

Brave New World

BRASSERIE LAUREL SETS THE BAR HIGH AT MIAMI WORLDCENTER

BY ANDREW GAYLE

There is something both modern and turn of the century about Brasserie Laurel, chef/owner Michael Beltran's hip French entry into the downtown eating scene. It may be the juxtaposition of 21st century high rises all around, contrasting the warm, interior design elements of curves and circles, which feel Art Nouveau, like a subway entrance in Paris. Or, it may just be the timeless quality you get in any good French café, where urban chic meets a menu replete with Francophile classics like escargot and foie gras.

Brasserie Laurel is now eight months old, the first fine dining establishment to plant its flag in the \$5 billion WorldCenter project, 27 acres of mixed-use skyscrapers and pedestrian malls that are creating a glamorously modern neighborhood on the northern edge of the old downtown. Buildings are still rising around Brasserie, a restaurant destined to become a reservations-only hotspot in this new world. So now is the best time to experience this WorldCenter pioneer before it is fully discovered and overrun.

The first thing you'll notice about Brasserie is attention to detail. They easily win the best cutlery award in Miami, with fluted butter knives and streamlined forks, special for each dish, and delicate glassware. The seating is either in an outdoor garden setting or inside, at one of the many curved booths that line the tall glass windows, enhanced by a terrazzo floor that continues the circle-within-a-circle visual theme. The music, at perfect volume, is a kind of French African house jazz – very cool.

If you measure a restaurant by its bread, Brasserie scores another win. What better prelude to dinner than hot rolls, theirs served with ice cold butter and anchovies, something unique in Miami. The cocktails are also lovely, concocted in the gold, blue, and marble bar that centers the restaurant. We tried the Monte Carlo, a sophisticated blend of rye, bitters, and French herbal liqueur, which came with one giant ice cube, and the Garçon's Sharpener, a refreshing mix of gin, cognac, lemon, orange, bitters, and soda.

We ordered two appetizer salads, the first a tasty tuna crudo with green beans, olives, egg, and tomato, a kind of crudo tuna niçoise, a clever mix of crunch and saltiness. The second was their chicory salad, which includes endive, Bosc pear, lumps of Shropshire blue cheese, and castelfranco (an Italian purple veined lettuce). This was a real wow, with the expected edge of endive bitterness balanced by the sweetness of sliced pear and the saltiness of the cheese, a beautiful taste combination.

We also tried the escargot, which was not served in the traditional cupped plate but ensconced in a tureen of light pastry, which absorbed the herb butter nicely. Then came the foie gras, which did not appear in its usual guise of sliced grey goose liver but came embedded with cocoa nibs and green onion bits, accompanied by a canelé pastry, all glazed in a raspberry gastrique sauce. Simply gor-



Photos by RoboLife Benitez



TOP: EXECUTIVE CHEF ASHLEY MONCADA, WHO TRANSITIONED TO BRASSERIE LAUREL FROM ANOTHER RESTAURANT OF OWNER BELTRAN'S ARIETE HOSPITALITY GROUP.

ABOVE: IMPECCABLE SERVICE AND ATTENTION TO DETAIL IN THE DINING ROOM

OPPOSITE:
TOP LEFT: TUNA CRUDO SALAD
TOP RIGHT: ESCARGOT IN PASTRY
BOTTOM LEFT: LOBSTER IN A BISQUE
BOTTOM RIGHT: VENISON IN SAUCE AU POIVRE

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geous in appearance and taste.

Nor did the entrees at Brasserie Laurel disappoint. Having been too cowardly to try the frogs' legs, we stretched our palates with lobster in a bisque served with veal sweetbreads (yes, organ meat!) and venison, the latter served in a pool of sauce au poivre, with a flat, fried potato rosti. Both flavors were at the edge of the known, with the creamy sweetbreads and the sweet and slightly gamey – in a good way – venison. We balanced these with the slam-drunk burger au poivre on brioche, with gruyere cheese and caramelized onions, and a lamb chop special. We did not try the signature Boeuf en Croûte which, at \$150, is a beef fillet wrapped in puff pastry that can easily feed four.

Overseeing the kitchen at Brasserie Laurel is Executive Chef Ashley Moncada, who transitioned from her role as chef de cuisine

of Ariete in Coconut Grove, another of the creations of Beltran's Ariete Hospitality Group (which includes Chug's Cuban Diner, The Taurus, The ScapeGoat, and El Vecino.) A veteran of kitchens in France, Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and Africa, Chef Ashley brings an inventive touch to haute French cooking, adding to the sense of the Brasserie being both a classic French restaurant and a cutting-edge modern Parisian café with a dash of Miami modernism.

There is a feeling here that every detail has been attended to, from the comfortable seating to the curvilinear sconces. Brasserie exudes a confidence and competence, a kind of comfortable hipness, where the service is attentive without being noticed, and the sense of being very French is neither strained or staid. You feel like you've gone to someplace far away, and happily so. ♦