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Dining Out

Creative license

Chef Brenton Hammer gets inventive at Platinum's wondrous dining room

by AL MANCINI

LIFE IS FULL OF SURPRISES. As I watched the new Platinum hotel rise up from East Flamingo Road over the last year, it appeared to be nothing more than a tacky monstrosity, which I expected would end up being the type of low-rent "condotel" I remembered from my childhood at the Jersey shore. Imagine my surprise to find out its tacky orange-ish exterior houses a true luxury property and a restaurant that offers some of the most creative food in Las Vegas.

Called simply The Restaurant at Platinum, the hotel's dining room is located on the fifth floor, adjacent to a rooftop pool that also serves as a lounge. It has a hip, modern décor. Plush dark booths line one wall, with the room growing brighter as you approach the windows overlooking the pool.

The dinner menu, created by executive chef Brenton Hammer, is a bit intimidating at first glance. Most of its offerings are available in either full portions or microportions, and there are some rather extraordinary combinations. Seafood options, for example, include monkfish in crisp proscuitto with wild mushrooms, heirloom tomato jam, vanilla pomegranate gel, celery root and black truffle (\$33/\$18) and butterfish with vanilla poached gooseberries, smoked salmon, sunchoke and black lentils (\$33/\$18). Among the meat and game you'll find poached and roasted young chicken with whispers of Parmesan, caramelized pumpkin, powdered brown butter, braised leek and smoked paprika (\$33/\$18) and South Dakota bison with caramel and burning cinnamon, olive caviar, chocolate salt, grated truffle, hazelnut and dehydrated red wine (\$39/\$24).

Now, I know my way around good food, but trying to wrap my head around the vast majority of descriptions on this menu was enough to make it spin. So we just decided to concentrate on the main ingredients, and put our trust in the chef -- which proved to be an excellent decision. Anxious to try as many things as possible, my wife and I decided to share smaller portions



Photo by Todd Lussier
Butter-poached Maine lobster with buttered popcorn

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of arugula salad (\$7), lobster (\$28) and Colorado lamb shoulder (\$20), as well as a one-size-only order of duck (\$39) -- all of which was more than enough for two people.

The salad was a decent-sized bed of arugula topped with brie, candied pears, ginger, proscuitto and spicy pecans. It was tasty, but had the misfortune of arriving at the table at the same time as the lobster, which monopolized my attention. The menu describes that dish as butter-poached Maine lobster with buttered popcorn, ricotta gnocchi, horseradish and wild mushrooms, although I would have been hard pressed to locate several of those ingredients in the frothy mixture I quickly devoured. Nonetheless, the baby lobster tail was among the most tender I've ever eaten, and the dried horseradish added an amazing kick to a dish already bursting with flavor.

The lamb was equally incredible, adorned with sweet corn and powdered Mediterranean spices. To top it off, it arrived with an inverted wine glass filled with atomized rosemary air, which was tilted as we began our meal to provide a scent of rosemary that subtly infused a hint of the herb on the palate without overpowering.

Our final course consisted of a duck served in six individual courses on one plate. It was a spectacular arrangement that included a spicy Thai-style consommé, a duck confit spring roll, duck proscuitto salad with brie and ginger, a tiny "corned duck" Reuben sandwich, tandoori duck thigh with jasmine and curry, and seared duck breast with leek and sweet corn. Only the Reuben failed to astound us, with the numerous strong tastes on the sandwich overpowering the duck.

Every dish we sampled was a world-class work of art that pushed the envelope of culinary creativity. Nonetheless, the meals themselves didn't have the feel of snooty avant garde cuisine. Forget the scary descriptions; if you like the main ingredient, you'll love these dishes.

The Restaurant at Platinum still seems to be working out some kinks in the service department. But our waiter was friendly and helpful, despite a few mistakes. And they're offering anyone with local I.D. a great deal while they work through the growing pains: 25 percent off the bill through December 22. I recommend taking advantage of it, before word of Hammer's incredible food spreads.

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