

“All the News
That’s Fit to Print”

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Morning clouds and drizzle south and east. Partly sunny. Highs 70s to near 90. Partly cloudy northwest tonight. Mostly cloudy southeast. Texas report, Pages 27A-27B.

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PAT'S PICK



BY PATRICIA SHARPE

The best new restaurant in Texas right now.

Mind games are the order of the day at Congress, the elegant new lair of David Bull, the chef who recently resurfaced in Austin after a stint in Dallas. The opposite of an Everyman, Mr. Bull champions the complicated and unexpected (think rib-eye cap accented with smoke-zapped caramel sauce or savory-salty-sweet bone marrow custard). And in the two months since Congress opened, he and Rebecca Meeker, the chef de cuisine, have been offering some of the most complex, delicious food in the city.

The small room is lofty, with crystal light fixtures illuminating tones of champagne and cream. The only jarring note is that unoccupied tables are left unset save for napkins — as a result, they look positively naked. The chairs are comfy, though, and once you're seated, you may choose either a three- or seven-course menu, priced at \$65 and \$95 respectively (sans wine).

If it's available, you should pounce on the gorgeous steak tartare, a generous starter of house-cut rib-eye brightened with a sharp whiff of Dijon and topped with a fortune in black truffle slices; the accompanying fried oysters — a surf-ish extra — should be eaten instantly, while piping hot. If you don't fancy raw beef, the appetizer of buffalo-milk burrata — a creamy mound of Italy's second-most-luxurious cheese, after mascarpone — will do quite nicely, playing well against the bitterness of wild arugula and the sweet-sour contrasts of an agrodolce sauce.

Of the second courses, our group of five was totally seduced by the "white" lobster bisque (we traded plates, and you could tell who had the bisque by the



MATT RAENWATERS

"oh, wow"). The dish takes its name from Mr. Bull's decision to transform the traditional ingredient of tomato paste into a garnish of bright, sweet Fresno chile-tomato jam. Equaling the bisque in overall appeal was an utterly different creation, a veritable mountain of braised oxtail, a beef cut that seems to be upstaging short ribs these days. A Parmesan wafer and a poached quail egg provided texture contrasts.

Meats are a strength here, but you'd miss out if you didn't choose one of the vegetable selections, like the delicate ravioli filled with a purée of Thumbelina carrots. The pasta envelopes are caressed by a tart, frothy lemongrass foam, a smart accompaniment that keeps the combo from careening into the too-sweet column.

And speaking of sweets, an undeniable draw at Congress is the presence of its dessert chef, Plinio Sandalio, a rising talent most recently at Textile in Houston. We liked his sweet-potato beignets, rolled in salt, sugar and ground roasted chicory root, and we adored their sidekicks, salted butter ice cream and a sliver of pecan brittle. But the dessert that dazzled us was the one that sounded most like a train wreck: bittersweet-chocolate brownies garnished with cumin-candied pecans, roasted-black-garlic purée and chile-fla-

Congress, 200 Congress Avenue (512-827-2760). Dinner Tuesday-Thursday, 6 p.m.-10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 6 p.m.-11 p.m. Closed Sunday and Monday. Reservations highly recommended.

vored wafers. Three bites into it, I was thinking, "This is insane, and it's brilliant!"

As I left the dining room, slightly giddy, it occurred to me that Austin has a new special-occasion restaurant. Then I ran to remind my friends: My birthday's just around the corner.

Dining coverage is provided by

TexasMonthly

For more columns by Patricia Sharpe and listings of recommended restaurants across the state:

texasmonthly.com/food

Congress, outfitted in colors of champagne and cream, offers some of the most complex food in Austin.

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