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The Filter: Dining

OUR FAVORITE RESTAURANTS, BISTROS, CAFES, AND JOINTS



PAT'S PICK

Congress

Austin

MIND GAMES ARE THE order of the day at Congress, the elegant new lair of chef David Bull, who's recently resurfaced in Austin after a stint in Dallas. The opposite of an everyman, Bull champions the complicated and unexpected (think ribeye cap accented with smoke-zapped-caramel sauce or savory-salty-sweet bone marrow custard). And in the two months since Congress debuted, he and chef de cuisine Rebecca Meeker 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 ribeye 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

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mound of Italy's second-most-sumptuous cheese, after mascarpone—will do quite nicely; it plays off 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 by the “oh, wow” exactly who had the bisque). The dish takes its name from 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 something from 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 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-flavored wafers. Three bites into it, I was thinking, “This is insane, and it’s brilliant!” As I left the dining room, slightly giddy, it hit me—Austin has a new special-occasion restaurant. Then I ran to remind my friends: My birthday’s just around the corner. Bar. *200 Congress Ave (512-827-2760). Dinner Tue–Thur 6–10, Fri & Sat 6–11. Closed Sun & Mon. Reservations highly recommended. \$\$\$\$ (W+)*

For a recipe, go to texasmonthly.com.

PATRICIA SHARPE



NEW + NOTEWORTHY

Tango & Malbec

Houston

The name sounds like, um, a Buenos Aires vineyard? We’re still pondering. Although we did not observe anyone actually dancing at this spacious Argentine-influenced venue a block from the Galleria, we were offered plenty of fine red wine and smoke-grilled cuts from various edible critters. Tango & Malbec goes beyond the South American steakhouse shtick, so we began by sharing flaky empanadas (pictured), one filled with ground beef and olives, one with ham and melty cheese, and one with cream of corn. Then we dug into the traditional parrillada completa, or mixed grill: buffalo tenderloin, beef short ribs, blood sausage, and lamb chops, along with eggplant escabeche and sautéed mushrooms. Bar. *2800 Sage Rd (713-629-8646). Open Mon–Wed 11–11, Thur–Sat 11–2 a.m., Sun 11–10. \$\$\$\$ (W+)*

NEW + NOTEWORTHY

Seasons 52

Plano

We got off to a great start here with fresh organic greens topped with red and yellow grape tomatoes, toasted pumpkin seeds, and a dynamite white balsamic vinaigrette. It’s hard to believe, but nothing on the seasonally inspired menu contains more than 475 calories; thus we guiltlessly devoured an entrée of house-made Sonoma goat cheese ravioli (the size of fried eggs) with roasted garlic and basil. Desserts, \$2.50 each and served in square shot glasses, are mini-versions of treats like Key lime pie and carrot cake; we quite liked the Meyer lemon pound cake. The room is spacious, with an inviting outdoor patio, and the wine list is impressive, with sixty available by the glass. Bar. *The Shops at Legacy, 7300 Lone Star Dr (972-312-8852). Open Sun–Thur 11:30–10, Fri & Sat 11:30–11. \$\$\$\$ (W+)*