

HOLY SMOKE! The essential guide to Texas BBQ + Recipes

AUSTIN

M O N T H L Y

111
FUN
THINGS
TO DO THIS
SUMMER

ZACH
ANNER

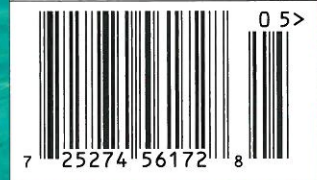
OPRAH'S
NEW "IT" BOY



MAY 2011

US \$3.95

0 5 >



www.austinmonthly.com

MAY

BEYOND THE MENU | SPOTLIGHTS | RESTAURANTS | POUR

DINING



True Gem

Dining is an event at Congress, where traditional dishes get elegant upgrades, like this lobster bisque with tomato jam and a lobster ricotta fritter. Page 194



Valrhona chocolate terrine with candied hazelnuts

Taste of the Town

CONGRESS HAS FIRST-CLASS FOOD AND A CASUALLY ELEGANT ATMOSPHERE

BY LYNNE MARGOLIS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NESSA KESSINGER

Ever since my flower-child days, I've adhered to the philosophy that dresses are for dressing up, and jeans are for everything else. I did have a career-suit-and-pumps phase (running—literally—through hundreds of dollars in panty hose) but ditched it when I moved to Austin.

But for my visit to Congress at the Austonian, our city's toniest new address, I had a little black dress in mind. It was my birthday, after all, the one day of the year you're supposed to feel special. I decided to downshift to slacks, however, and was glad I did when I noticed many other diners in jeans. I have to say, as much as I love Austin's casualness, I occasionally wish we would up our game. Not that I want to see people turned away, but sometimes I want a little finery with my fine dining. Sometimes I want the event as well as the dinner.

You can have that at Congress, even in jeans. A study in casual elegance, the decor features deep booths and wingback chairs, linen and leather set amid wood and mirrors and a high ceiling dangling crystal chandeliers resembling Calder mobiles—a far cry from the Victoriana of Chef David Bull's previous Austin haunt, the Driskill Hotel. The main room holds only 44, including a semi-private alcove. There's also a party room for 12.



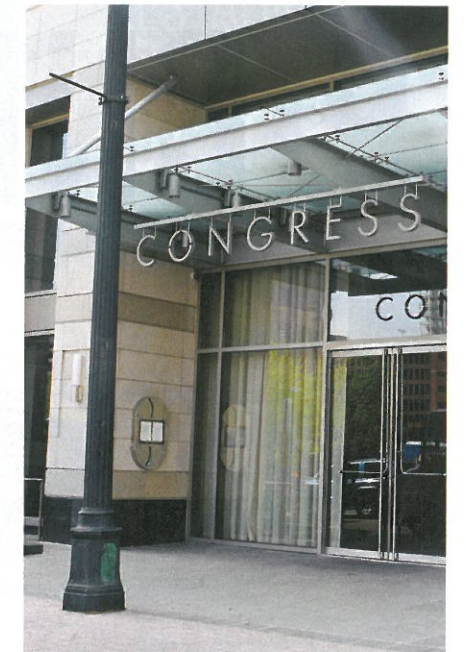
Touches like the beautiful, perfectly balanced silverware, silver-domed butter dishes and the diagonal-laid brick of the private dining room's back wall, viewed through its glass enclosure, give the feel of old-world class. Partner Scott Walker, who looks more like a pork-pie-hatted Tom Waits impersonator than the host he apparently was that night, brings the local character. A drink menu harking back to pre-Prohibition days is another arbiter of elegance, with bitter-infused libations given names like Preferred Lies and Extra Old Fashioned. After a round of martinis, we chose the 2006 Selvapiana Chianti Rufina Riserva Bucerchiale, a pleasurable, not overly bold bottle that earned a repeat order.

Instead of a la carte dishes, Congress has a seven-course tasting menu and a three-course prix-fixe menu. The menus change nightly, as well as seasonally. Fortunately, signature items, such as the lobster bisque with Fresno tomato jam and a lobster ricotta fritter, should remain year-round. "It's more of an interactive dish than people may think," Bull says. When a server pours the creamy bisque over the jam, you stir it with the fritter on a fork to make a sweet-and-spicy, velvety elixir.

The wild arugula-artichoke confit salad with burrata, an



This page (from left): rack of lamb, the modern glass exterior and lobster salad



Italian mozzarella, and heavenly red grape agro dolce (sweet and sour dressing), should also remain. If you're lucky, you'll catch the lobster salad, which Bull characterizes as "a fun dish" representing both indulgence and the comfort of familiarity via iceberg lettuce. Arrayed with colorful vegetables, white anchovy and a lemon-herb vinaigrette and accompanied by a kalamata olive tapenade, it was, indeed, a superb indulgence.

Describing the philosophy behind his garlic-and-chive gnocchi with braised oxtail and egg Parmesan, Bull says, "I intentionally put something like oxtail with something familiar like gnocchi. It forces the issue a bit."

That is, the issue of introducing diners to the unusual, a trend that's picking up here in comfort-zone jeans-town. Bull says chefs have long been cooking "pig ears and trotters" for one another but have only recently begun serving them publicly. With increased awareness about our diets, we've also

become more open to culinary adventure—in part because chefs like Bull ease us into it with offerings like the gnocchi, which mixes a quail egg yolk with the Parmesan to add creamy texture and flavor.

Though rack of lamb might be construed as traditional, Bull takes it beyond the usual by adding aromatic cardamom to yogurt and serving with candied orange and chips, batons and puree of salsify. It earned ecstatic raves. The grilled ribeye loin, with spinach and shallot confit, garlic puree and foie gras beurre rouge, didn't rate as highly, but it disappeared as well.

So did our desserts, including a silky-smooth grapefruit sorbet punctuated with little Campari-flavored pop-rocks fireworks and a terrine of 70 percent Valrhona chocolate with candied hazelnuts, cocoa nibs and a white-chocolate liquid center. Presented on its side, it looks like a cute snail—one that won't make it across the plate before it's gone. Bull accurately calls it "luxurious and decadent."

And that's exactly what you want in a restaurant worthy of celebrating something special. Not that you should need an excuse to indulge—or dress up—but either way, it's going to be fun. And that, in the end, is what's most important. ☺

CRITIC'S PICKS

FIRST COURSE: Lobster salad
SECOND COURSE: White lobster bisque; garlic-and-chive potato gnocchi
THIRD COURSE: Rack of lamb; grilled ribeye loin
DESSERT: Chocolate terrine; grapefruit sorbet

THE FACTS

CUISINE: "Natural American"
CHEF: David Bull
AMBIANCE: Comfortably elegant
PRICES: Three-course dinner, \$65; seven-course tasting menu, \$95 or \$145 with wines; enhancements and desserts, \$12-\$36
HOURS: Tuesday through Thursday, 6 p.m. to 10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 6 p.m. to 11 p.m.
ADDRESS: 200 Congress Ave.
PHONE: 827-2760
WEB: congressaustin.com