



laidback manor

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RESTAURANT REVIEW

On the edge of the seat at laidback manor By Andrea Afra

When I first heard of laidback manor it was from a friend who stopped in there for a lunch bite. They reported back that while it was a fine dining restaurant, they could have sworn that grungy, grinding strains of Nirvana were coming through the speakers. I thought, “Odd, maybe it was playing songs from a radio station?” Curiosity peaked, I Googled laidback manor which brought me to their website. First I looked through the lunch menu. Selections like southern chicken salad, Monte Cristos and flatiron beef were innocent enough. The other menus were titled ‘dinner menu’, ‘the treatment’, ‘the voyage’, and ‘encore’. I feel almost voyeuristic while examining a restaurant’s menus before visiting, like peeking through a fence hole into a neighbor’s yard before attending their dinner party. I already know the layout of the place, what is to be expected. However after reading through Chef Randy Rucker’s food agenda, I felt as if I had discovered something that I shouldn’t have, something that left fear in my heart all the while tempting me to venture further in. Sort of like the Secret Garden. I saw things that I had never seen before in this town. It scared me, but I liked it. I took a closer look.



If you have heard of laidback manor then you have heard of its foie gras chocolate milkshake. The southern city girl in me protested the fusion of liver and cocoa. How dare they taint such a holy ingredient as chocolate with something so decadent as foie gras? I swore then and there that it would never touch my lips. Herein lies the challenge of progressive cuisine in Houston. If it's not battered in cornmeal or served with a side of gravy will a real Texan even attempt a bite? Would a more mature diner appreciate the whimsical fare coming out of the world's top kitchens? I invited my grandparents as guinea pigs to test their limits along with mine and to see how far the culinary world has split the generation gap.

While most of the dishes have at least one familiar ingredient, Chef Rucker doesn't let you get too comfortable. I don't know anyone under the age of forty that doesn't agree that Houston needs someone to push the proverbial envelope and not just by following the local trends. Randy Rucker is the guy for the job. At 26 years old he has already run with the best of them, local and national. Born here in Houston and hailing from the quaint town of Tomball, Randy sought out his calling in the culinary world. He found his way from Texas Tech to study culinary arts at Johnson and Wales in Providence, Rhode Island. After graduation, he worked under the guidance of well known local, national and international chefs thriving under the influence of each mentor. Under each chef he learned that it takes more than great food to make a great restaurant. From Chef Mark Cox of Houston's Mark's American Cuisine he learned "the importance of utilization and respect for raw product." From the classic French method he learned under Chef John Richardson of Rhode Island's Pot au Feu, to the edgy experimental approach of Chef Blumenthal of the Fat Duck in the U.K., the menu of laidback manor reflects the story of Chef Rucker's life.

The interior of the restaurant is clean, dark, and pretty much a blank canvas. A handful of bright paintings add the only color to the décor, leaving a lot to the imagination. This is all part of the goal Chef Rucker had in mind. When all pretension is removed from a fine dining experience, all that is left is unforgettably good service and food. As an added extravagance laidback manor features a Kitchen Table, which is literally in the kitchen so that a party of diners can watch the chefs in action.

A lot of young chefs nowadays are towing the food line with cooking techniques that require physics and equipment usually found only in science labs. We soon found out what eclectic concoctions Chef Rucker was turning out. Along with industrious sous chef Andrew Rahaut and Justin Basye, the chefs of laidback manor are fearless in their approach to cuisine.

As I said, I invited my grandparents to dine with me, a set up I admit. I knew that some of the dishes that we would encounter would be a little too adventurous for them at first sight but that they would be up for the challenge. Growing up, they were my guides to the world of fine dining, enabling me to taste foods like baramundi fish and Morton Bay sea bugs on a trip to Australia and treating me to local spots like Ruggles and Redwood Grill. While my grandparents are young, fit and classy I have to say that they are a little old fashioned in some areas. My grandfather, Joe, is charmingly pessimistic and my grandmother Gaylene, is a germaphobe at heart.

Our server, Catherine, was less a waitress than a tour-guide. Her knowledge and enthusiasm betrayed her background in wine and gourmet food. Along the way she highlighted what might have been overlooked, introducing us to the media that were used in each dish. And we needed all the help we could get.



The first course of the ‘voyage’ menu was a tray of three items placed before each of us. The first contained a bowl filled with a thin slice of Serrano ham, a spear of white asparagus and a dusting of dried egg yolk. I rolled it up like a cigar, biting into the deceptively mild teaser. I was surprised that the distinct flavor of egg white was so apparent. The next in line was a juicy Rainier cherry dipped whole into smoked white chocolate, served in the center of a glass cube. Beautiful, sweet and delicious, my grandfather commented that he did indeed like it. The last of the trio was the most unique. A large silver spoon with curved handle was introduced as a bloody Mary on a spoon. It contained celery pudding, tomato powder, worcestershire powder, micro celery, and tobasco flakes. To eat it, you put the whole thing in your mouth and let the flavors combine. Sure enough the sensation is that of a spicy bloody Mary, and I was surprised to hear my grandfather say that he liked this as well. Though he had to add, “But what’s the use?”

The next dish was a fish fritter, the chef’s fun take on fish sticks. A ball of fish and potato is fried and served on a small sword with a side of fennel ‘pudding’ and black olive crisp. We all liked this dish, finding it to be comfortably familiar. It was followed with a custard of white asparagus, served chilled with a touch of a creamy anchovy-garlic sauce and a sprinkle of tiny garlic ‘whistle pods’. I was impressed with the concept but not as excited by the mild taste as much as the consistency. But if you appreciate the subtleness of white asparagus don’t miss this dish.

Presented to us next was the beef tartare, a small round of marinated raw beef with a side I found out was a jelly of vegetable soup. It was the weirdest little blob yet I loved it. And though we all order our burgers rare, we took some encouraging from Catherine to taste the tartare. Seasoned with dijon, shallot, capers, piment de espелette, and chive, I enjoyed the taste but the texture of raw meat was too primal for me. I was secretly proud of myself for trying it though. My grandfather liked it and I could tell that my grandmother really wanted to try it so she closed her eyes and took a bite, then another. We applauded her bravery, this woman who traveled to a restaurant in France, only to request that the chef prepare her tartare well done. We all enjoyed a scoop of Chanterelle mushroom ice cream that came with the dish. I never would have guessed that I would have ever had mushrooms that way. It was creamy and cleansing after all the ruckus the tartare had caused.

We oohed and aahed over the dish set before us next, Chef Rucker's Surf and Turf. The surf-side held seared mahi mahi perched atop a white elf mushroom that sat on a bed of shaved leeks. A bite of this was to be dragged through a vibrant green streak of peppery arugula juice that adorned the plate. The meaty mushroom and perfectly cooked fish were easily one of my favorite dishes of the evening. The turf end of the deal was a thick, salty cut of pork belly served with a swatch of celery 'froth' that cut through the saltiness of the meat. I personally am not a huge fan of pork but my grandparents are always ordering chops and enjoyed this cut as well.

We sat back and sighed, wondering when this influx of food would subside. After eight presentations we were beginning to feel full, though the portions and timing allowed us to continue steadfast in our goal to reach the end. Up to bat was Atlantic salmon with a bed of buttery black 'forbidden' rice under a veil of Manhattan clam chowder froth. The briny clam flavors served to enhance the salmon without overpowering it. Forbidden rice is black from its high phytonutrient content, and named so because of its history of being reserved for the emperors of ancient China. It added striking visual contrast to the fish and its flavor was nutty and complex compared to average long grain white rice which has little nutritional value. This dish, too, was a table favorite.

A glass tube of quince soda was brought out for each of us, another great palate cleanser. This was then followed by, to my surprise, the foie gras chocolate milkshake. I really thought I was going to walk away from the evening without having to face this trial. Intrigue overcame my aversion and my grandmother and I tried a sip at the same time. Creamy, rich, chocolately, frosty, it was all of the things a milkshake should be. The last taste ended on a borderline savory note with a grainy hint of the liver to remind us that we were indeed sucking pate through a straw. I hated myself for loving it. I finished the glass.

A succulent duck sous-vide served with a puree of banana and a curry reduction was brought out. Again, the presentation was a work of art and we all agreed that while we typically wouldn't order duck, this version was different. The texture was sublime and the flavor was perfectly preserved from the mode of preparation. Sous-vide is a method of cooking in a vacuum sealed plastic bag and controlled by an immersion circulator that regulates the temperature exactly to the degree desired. The banana complimented the duck though the curry reduction was too subtle to play a role in the overall taste.

Flatiron beef, also prepared sous-vide, was juicy and perfectly cooked save for one bite that was too tough. This can happen with any cut of meat so it wasn't a factor in the total scheme of things. A chef friend of mine said that this can happen even when the circulator is used, usually due to the bag sitting in one position for a moment too long as they will do if caught on another item or the side of the basin. It was served on fermented cabbage, much like sauerkraut in taste and odor.

We were seriously nearing our limit when the second to last course was brought out. Luckily I was able to muster up enough energy to taste one of the most heavenly cheeses I've ever had. The Humboldt Fog goat cheese is akin to a cross of Stilton and Brie. Its divinely creamy texture gently melted in my mouth as I imagined it spread on a crispy slice of Wassa or soda crackers. I ate a bite of it with the homemade candied walnuts nearby and together the flavors soared higher. I felt the end nearing and I blindly reached for a small slice of seared cantaloupe. Sweet and warm, one side browned from the heated metal pan, the simple approach added so much to one of my favorite fruits. Last in line before the final course, an ice cream made with port wine. Serene and dulcet, the port essence was a mere yet distinctive whisper.

Finally we made it to the last course of Tres Leches. Two kinds of cake, chocolate and white chocolate, were topped with caramelsque dulce de leche, ice cream and whipped cream. A wafer thin crisp adorned the top. I took a few bites and sat back wondering how I'd made it to the end as I slowly exhaled.

This wasn't just a meal. It was a full blown production. I felt I should thank the chefs who had orchestrated such a superb dinner. I peeked back into the kitchen where I saw Chef Rucker with his back turned to me, facing the line. His arms spread wide as he leaned over reading the score, timing everything the way a conductor does.

He turned and I thanked him and he asked me how everything was. I answered honestly that we all had enjoyed ourselves thoroughly. The reason the restaurant is called the laidback manor is to reflect the laidback staff and how they want you to feel during your time with them.

At our follow up Chef Rucker quoted what Thomas Keller said about ingredients and application – “Anybody can make beef tenderloin taste good, but it takes a true culinarian to make tripe taste good.” Ingredients don't make the cook, their passion and talent does!” And passion is as important as salt.

On the way home we discussed our opinions of the meal. I was truly enchanted and inspired. My grandmother was emboldened by her venturesome trials and tastings. My grandfather however still had trouble wrapping his mind around the experience and didn't really appreciate the ambitious concepts that Chef Rucker had materialized. “I just don't see the point”, he said.

“The point is that you experienced something new,” I told him. “Something you'll talk about and remember for a long time.”

He reluctantly agreed that it was, indeed, unforgettable.