

FOOD IN HOUSTON

A DISCUSSION OF RESTAURANTS, FOOD STORES, DISHES, AND
TRENDS IN HOUSTON.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 24, 2006

laidback manor throws a grenade on the plate

“Call out the instigators because there's something in the air. We've got to get together sooner or later because the revolution's here, and you know it's right.”
-Thunderclap Newman, *Something in the Air*

The revolution is here, and it is on Main Street. A very young chef named Randy Rucker just opened an amazing new downtown restaurant called laidback manor. He is serving the most unusual, creative, and revolutionary cuisine I have seen recently in Houston. As an illustration, some of the dishes I tried last weekend included:

- Flat iron steak tartare served next to a tempura fried quail egg and a scoop of intensely flavored sweet potato ice cream. The crunchy egg married perfectly with the creamy texture of the tartare and the ice cream. Even better was the marriage of contrasting flavors -- salty, meaty, and sweet.
- Oyster mushroom and pearl onions cooked in a sous vide method, which involves vacuum packing the food in advance and slow cooking it in a water bath with an immersion circulator. The mushrooms lost none of their moisture or flavor in the cooking process, were uniformly cooked throughout, and were easily the best oyster mushrooms I have ever had.
- Pan seared fluke topped with an ethereal bouillabaisse foam and served with baby vegetables and some sort of tasty lime green puree.
- “Ham and cheese” – small stacks of Serrano ham, manchego cheese, marinated pear and arugula. This was perhaps the least flavorful dish I had, but the idea was playful and fun.
- Milk chocolate foie gras milkshake. Yes, you can taste the foie gras – and it is great with chocolate.
- An incredible rice pudding with intense Indian flavors, such as cardamom, plus a mint foam.

The food is like a grenade on the plate. Every dish served by Rucker involves some innovative idea or method – a “deconstructed” take on a classic, food turned into foam, unusual purees, sous vide cooking. Rucker is not alone in developing these unusual techniques. He is part of a wider revolution in cooking that as controversial as it is mind-blowing. One leader of this attempted coup is the Spanish chef Ferran Adrià of El Bulli. Many people think El Bulli is the best restaurant in the world, and many despise the very idea of the restaurant. Adrià treats cooking like a chemistry lab; he even uses test tubes and beakers. He also brings playfulness, irony, and the absurd to cuisine. By its very definition, his approach is about throwing bombs – rethinking and radicalizing the way we cook and eat. Adrià’s approach has many detractors, including many leading American chefs. But Adrià also has influenced a small number of American chefs, mostly in New York and Chicago. The one chef who is leading the introduction of these techniques to Houston is Rucker.

Although this grenade on the plate may be mind blowing for some, it will be an act of war for others. Culinary conservatives will cringe. For diners who need steak and potatoes, these dishes will be weird, if not downright disturbing. Many wine fans will find the current list of reasonably priced wines to be too small. Diners who want atmosphere will despair that the restaurant spent most of its starting capital on the kitchen, not the interior decorator. At least one critic is going to vilify laidback manor as just plain wrong.

This revolution will appeal to individuals who like their food served with a side of creative thought. For those people, in January 2006 in Houston, Texas, laidback manor is as good as it gets – and probably better than we deserve.