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Alison Cook: Restaurant Review

Chef Randy Rucker prepares a dish.
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Bravery amid the bobbles

At laidback manor, there's much to like and much more to be done

By **ALISON COOK**
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The wooden rocking chair in the window of laidback manor is meant to cue diners that within lies a laid-back experience.

There are other visual prompts as well, from the lower-case restaurant name to the blues on the sound system, from the wonderful pastiche of ancient flooring to the clonky paintings of the "My Best Friend's Cousin, the Artist" school. Add some murky gray- and wine-hued paint, and you have your basic starter-restaurant look, done on a wing and a prayer.

But at heart there is nothing laid-back about laidback manor. This new downtown restaurant on Main Street is terribly ambitious — almost painfully so. Young chef Randy Rucker aspires to bring deconstructionist, laboratory-honed cuisine to the people of Houston, following in the steps of avant-garde Spanish master Ferran Adria and such celebrated latter-day American disciples as Wiley DuFresne and Grant Achatz.

What that means, here, is lots of high-tech powders and foams and nitrogen-frozen thises and frothed thats. Outré little pickles. Counterintuitive flavors of ice cream. Odd-sounding combinations of ingredients. Obligatory pop-culture jokes: a rarefied Tater Tot here, a Dr Pepper-braised rib there.

Other conventions of the genre on display at laidback are the very precise, geometric plating of the food on unconventional service pieces. Tablecloths? No way. The avant-garde boys (and they are, interestingly, all male) may press glass candleholders into service as food pedestals, employ flat stones as plates and impale morsels on wicked-looking needles. The aim is to astonish and surprise.

This is a big dream for a young man on a modest budget, but Rucker — who has worked at Houston's Quattro and Mark's — has jumped on the avant-garde bandwagon with a vengeance.

"He joins a group of young chefs that are pushing the envelope of gastronomy," according to an early, earnest press release. Rucker was not too shy to invoke such meccas of progressive cuisine as Achatz's Alinea and Graham Elliot Bowles' Avenues, both in Chicago, and DuFresne's wd-50 in New York.

That set the tightrope high. Walking it would require exceptional discipline and precision. But while Rucker and his team show flashes of real talent, the kitchen at the 4-month-old eatery simply is not consistent enough to bring off a high-wire act.

When you are presenting diners with a delicate Asian soup-spoonful of pale sunchoke purée, topped by a gold dab of wild Arctic char roe, you simply cannot serve it with a greasy, ill-fried banana chip. That was just one of numerous bobbles that made brave new ideas here fall flat.

Indeed, my first dinner at the end of January — a 10-course tasting menu for the reasonable price of \$60 — was better than a repeat in early April, priced \$10 higher. Lunch the following week was the least successful effort of all. I had held off reviewing in hopes that the kitchen would tighten up; instead, the reverse seems to be happening.

Frying is a recurrent problem. Rucker likes to insert tempura-fried elements or crisped shards of this and that in numerous courses, but the less-than-optimal execution can sabotage a dish. On early menus, a brandade fritter of puréed potato and salt cod was so oily that its meant-to-be ethereal "ocean froth" went for naught. (This froth is the descendant of foams so famously popularized by Adria at his El Bulli, outside of Barcelona, back in the mid-1990s.)

The same evening, the best dish of the night was dark, intense slices of preserved Russian boar with a purée of bacon and mushroom so voluptuous I wanted a quart of it to go. Yet a woeful "crispy" frog's leg in a pale, flabby batter thwarted the dish.

What light the frog leg shed on the boar is another issue entirely. I failed to see, or taste, the point.

The whole thrust of avant-garde cuisine is to illuminate, to provoke the diner to think of the foodstuffs before her in a new way. A mental light bulb — maybe even a skyrocket — should be set off by each dish. Too often that does not happen here.

But when it does, you can see that Rucker might actually, in time, be good at this stuff. I was amused and edified by the "duck, duck, goose" dish that appeared on early menus. The fowl trio was composed of an adorable brioche minisandwich of shreddy duck rilletes, a too-sweet "bonbon" of coffee and duck pâté and a teeny-tiny chocolate and foie gras milkshake that sounded grotesque and tasted fabulous. The dark, opulent mysteries of chocolate and goose liver came together in a startling, satisfying way.

On the same menu, I loved a "ravioli of brawn," filled with rich, unctuous meat, sparked with juicy caperberries (more fun than caper buds, if you ask me) and sauced with a frothy smoked-truffle anglaise.

What's brawn, you ask? It turns out to be just a more esoteric (and polite) name for head cheese, those jellied mosaics of pork jowl or beef shin or whatever else. It sang: I could have eaten a plateful of these ravioli, and I wish Rucker would give me the option.

I liked the tiny ellipse of avocado ice cream moored in a gentle tomato water and thrown into relief by crunchy crystals of Maldon sea salt. I enjoyed a dessert of buttery almond cake with a nice dab of caramelized banana pudding, all swished with a pickled beet purée that worked in a beautiful, sweet-sour way.

But in all, I took real pleasure in only five of the 10 small courses. A cauliflower panna cotta stuck me as bland, despite its hand-grated cured salmon and chive purée.

A small hunk of salmon poached "sous vide" style (vacuum-sealed and cooked at very low temperature) alerted me that this may not be the ideal way to cook fish. Thrice, the results have proved to be clammy and unnervingly, uniformly soft — a condition compounded by the tepid temperatures at which the pieces of salmon or halibut have been served.

I want to like this place. Rucker is an amiable teddy bear of a chef, and he gets points for thinking big. He gets points, too, for an engaging wine list with some genuinely thought-provoking elements. A Maso Canali pinot grigio is described as "crisp, green apple, damp flowers, transparent finish." When the overly chilled wine warms up a bit, you can actually taste all those elements.

The guy has some chops. I'm just not convinced that at laidback manor, as presently constituted, he is showcasing them to the best advantage.

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RESOURCES

laidback manor: 706 Main

Hours: 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m.
 and 5:30-11 p.m.
 Tuesdays-Fridays; 5-11
 p.m. Saturdays

Prices : Lunch: 3-course
 tasting \$30; starters \$6-\$9;
 entrees \$9-\$14. Dinner:
 10-course tasting \$70; a la
 carte starters \$8-\$12;
 entrees \$19-\$29; desserts
 \$6-\$8.

Credit cards: all major

Reservations: suggested;
 walk-ins OK

Noise level: quiet to
 moderate

Smoking: outdoor tables
 only

Call 713-227-0402 for more
 information.

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