

Executive Dining

Laidback Manor: Trendy cuisine hits highs in low-key restaurant

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I confess that I went to Laidback Manor expecting to laugh myself silly.

One of the oldest and most sure-fire laugh-getters is to make a pompous person look foolish. The folks at the restaurant that opened on Main Street at Capitol in January provided some ammunition before I ever crossed the threshold.

Take the Manhattan-meets-Mayberry juxtaposition of the highly sophisticated and even chi-chi with the down-home and aw-shucks. The name of the place is low-key and the logo is a rocking chair, suggesting a cozily relaxed approach to dining. And although the menu changes regularly, it has always been awash in the trendiest offerings and most bizarre combinations.

Grouper with a purée of artichokes and coffee beans. Smoked white-chocolate soup with dry fig pâte and Noble PX vinegar. A milk chocolate and foie gras milkshake or a pickled rhubarb and Altoid "smoothie," both of which triggered memories of that vintage "Saturday Night Live" sketch about the fish-mulching Bass-o-Matic blender. A dish dubbed bacon and eggs was founded on smoked bacon consommé and an egg poached at exactly 63 degrees centigrade.

The list of exotic ingredients is further lengthened by Banyuls vinaigrette (Banyuls is a sweet, port-like wine), granulated honey, black olive "paper," tomato powder, Cincinnati radishes, preserved Russian boar, oil of the Moroccan argan nut and hot sauce frozen by liquid nitrogen.

Another indication that Laidback Manor breathes rarefied culinary air is the restaurant's penchant for finishing dishes with aerated sauces or lagniappes -- licorice or Manchego cheese "air," curry froth, Banyuls "cloud," "Bombay chai" tea foam.

Such insubstantial fare might lead one to suspect that diners still could be a little hungry when they leave 26-year-old owner/chef Randy Rucker's deluxe, rather pricey eatery. But I left each time thoroughly satisfied -- and impressed with his imagination and skill.

Customers can sample Laidback Manor's wares several ways. The 10-course "Voyage" comes in five installments, or they can order off the short a la carte menu containing the quintet.

Each meal is preceded by a complimentary house-baked baguette and some flavored butter. I'll admit to chuckling a bit when the butter came in the same kind of small, scooped-out glass cube holding the votive candles gracing each table.

The bread was good. The butter, infused with roasted tomato and black olive one night and citrus the next, was tasty.

I had to stifle a snicker when a complimentary amuse bouche, a brandade fritter, rolled onto the table as the waiter set down the rough square tile bearing the little deep-fried ball of mashed codfish and potato.

Another amuse bouche, garlic-kissed arugula vichyssoise served in a small martini glass, was a deliciously refreshing variation on the classic French cold potato and leek soup.

Texas watermelon gazpacho was even more bracing, thanks to a dose of horseradish that gave a warm undercurrent to the chilled soup and the dollop of avocado mousse and sweet corn ice cream swimming in it.

Ravioli of smoked ham hock drizzled with oregano velouté and a dab of fig and juniper purée were too dry on the inside and tough on the outside. But the house-made pappardelle were cooked just right, and foraged mushrooms, cherry tomatoes and foamy Parmesan broth lent them some spark.

The kitchen's rice cookers also gave stellar performances with a mushroom risotto and a side dish of black rice. Some whole-grain mustard and smoked mascarpone cheese were stirred into the luscious risotto to marvelous effect, and a frothy spoonful of garlic soup on the side provided additional kick. Wonderfully chewy and grainy, the black rice was a kind of pedestal for a superb hunk of the mildest, tastiest grilled salmon imaginable.

Tomball-born Chef Rucker pays refined, whimsical homage to his Texas roots with his own take on corn dogs, tater tots and barbecue. For the latter, pork is braised in Dr Pepper and shredded, formed into a block that resembles a plug of chewing tobacco, crustily glazed with espresso, then served with super-smoky potato salad and paper-thin slices of pickled English cucumber.

By cooking sweetbreads firm rather than squishy and cutting them into cubes rather than leaving them whole, Rucker could turn scores of squeamish eaters into sweetbreads devotees.

The desserts, while distinctive, were less impressive. Madeleines fortified with ground tonka beans and served with mildly chocolate-y Oaxacan ice cream were an elegantly international but tame meal-ender. The tiny disc of chocolate and saffron ganache was fairly fudgy, if not noticeably short on saffron. And a scoop of cinnamon ice cream tweaked it nicely, but a smudge of corn and ancho chili purée added little to the plate except cachet.

In short, Laidback Manor is made for adventurous, elite eaters who don't mind a few misses among some marvelous hits.

Laidback Manor

Location: 706 Main at Capitol

Hours: Lunch: 11:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Tuesday through Friday. Dinner: 5:30 to 10:00 p.m.

Tuesday through Thursday, 5:30 to 11:00 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

Phone: 713-227-0402

Web Site: www.laidbackmanor.net

Summing up

Rating: Three forks

Food: Fancy-schmancy.

Atmosphere: Chic.

Service: Relaxed but polished.

Key

No forks: Don't bother.

One fork: Adequate.

Two forks: Return with pleasure.

Three forks: Treat yourself.

Four forks: City's finest.

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