Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Minneapolis' North Loop Standout: Tullibee

R. Daniel Foster · Wednesday, November 6th, 2019

I've been covering the Twin Cities' culinary scene for a few years – Minneapolis' Fig & Farro and St. Paul's revamped Lexington have been exceptional. Esquire magazine has termed Minneapolis "the food world's best-kept secret" and reasons for that designation just grew sharper with the opening of Tullibee in Minneapolis' hipster North Loop 'hood.

Occupying a portion of the Hewing Hotel's main floor, Tullibee is anchored with a bustling open kitchen. It has the same slightly kicky Nordic decor found elsewhere in the building, a converted century-old farm warehouse called the Jackson building.

Minneapolis-based ESG Architecture & Design mastered the look. A painted wooden deer head done in mosaic-style is a trippy standout among the various touches, created by local artist Cassandra Smith.

Hewing Hotel lobby / Photo: Theo Page

There's a butchery in the basement, and while that might sound like the opener for a horror novel, it's one of the reasons the place sells up to 300 burgers a week.

And that's just in the lounge.

We didn't come for a burger lunch, however, but a full course meal. The hotel is a five-minute walk from Target Field where the Minnesota Twins were battling the New York Yankees in a division series game. Bundled fans passed our wide window, "Homer Hankies" stuffed in back pockets.

Artist Cassandra Smith's painted deer head / Photo: Theo Page

One of America's best hipster 'hoods

"Ahh, a lovely view of the Deja Vu," one of my dining companions noted as he gazed out the window to the Deja Vu stripper joint down the street. Its Pepto-Bismol-colored awning was emblazed with this unfortunate marketing slogan: "100s of beautiful girls and 3 ugly ones."

My take: the Deja Vu keeps North Loop a bit real, given Forbes magazine named the area as "One of America's Best Hipster Neighborhoods." The Hewing Hotel, in fact, was deemed one of the

"Most Instagrammable Hotels in the U.S." by National Geographic. The Deja Vu doesn't appear on any "best" and "most" lists (besides my "most offensive marketing slogan" list), but it probably helps the surrounding hipster haven to not take itself too seriously.

They just need to nix that vulgar catchphrase.

The Hewing is indeed Instagrammable – the vintage building's rough edges are artfully retained, sometimes framed with modernist glass (witness the stylish entry). The Nordic touches include rosemåling found on plates and other ephemera (a decorative folk art with roots in Norway's rural valleys).

There's Viking ship moored on one of the numerous shelves in the lobby. The shelving's rich wood completes a black and brown decor scheme that's interrupted by large contemporary silver drops that hang from the ceiling near a fireplace – curiously unlit during a chilly October night.

Tullibee restaurant / Photo: Theo Page

We dig into the menu

Tullibee's menu is split into first, second and thirds. We began the evening with dry-aged beef tartare, inventively presented. It was wedged with rye crisp and topped with shaved frozen yogurt imbued with horseradish and lemon.

"I call this our gateway drug for the rest of the beef on the menu," said our affable server Meredith.

She was right. The dish was astounding and (spoiler alert) the other dishes we tried equaled that start. It's surprising to find cuisine this excellent in a hotel restaurant (Meredith half-joked that the hotel was an afterthought to the restaurant). In truth, I couldn't find any detail, flavor, or presentation that was off, which is rare. Neither could my two dining companions who, being St. Paul residents, said they would soon return.

The beef was wholly flavorful and the various textures, from the snap of the rye to the icy topping with its gentle horseradish slam, set it off wonderfully. One at our table was a bit wary of the horseradish, but as I noted, it was a gentle slam. Nothing overpowered.

Sorry, Wisconsin: Minnesota's tartare excels

As we raved about the tartare with Meredith, my photographer archly commented: "Yeah, there's no ketchup in it." Meredith responded (without missing a beat): "Well, we're not in Wisconsin." Touché. We appreciated the interstate rivalry, especially since Wisconsin is famed for supper clubs born of the prohibition. The state, in fact, has an official "Supper Club" day.

Speaking of: St. Paul's venerable Lexington fits into the mold of Midwest supper clubs. Its own tartare – a layered punch of salted mango, toasted rice, and crispy shallot – equals that found at Tullibee (named for a Minnesota game fish).

The crunch and cell-smash sensation of the famed SweeTango apple

Tullibee's house-cured country ham / Photo: Theo Page

Picking up on Meredith's cue, we ordered the house-cured country ham, aged for 12-months in the basement. It's a Tullilbee favorite (along with those burgers) and I found out why. It equaled any I've tasted in Barcelona or Madrid; Spain is well known for its national obsession with the meat.

The ham arrived with a black garlic spread, beans pickled in champagne vinegar and grilled bread drizzled with more garlic – a perfect platform for the succulent ham.

Apple also arrived with the dish, the product of the University of Minnesota's horticultural station, one of the nation's three apple-breeding programs. SweeTango (#1914) is a brand of the "Minneiska" apple, known for jumbo cells that shatter in the mouth, bathing it with honey-sweet juice. The apple slices tasted just as good as that sounds, the crunch and cell-smash sensation creating an over-the-top flavor experience.

"We're the only restaurant in North Loop with a fully licensed butcher onsite (Moriah Seaberg), so we're able to bring in full animals," Meredith informed us. There's a fermentation room in the basement as well, tended by the sous chefs. One of them named Jim graced the table with some dills and pickled chanterelles.

A farm with a heart

The 14-ounce rib cap along with other dishes / Photo: Theo Page

This was going to be an all-out meat lover's dinner.

We ordered the day's butcher selection, a 14-ounce rib cap that was dry-aged for 90 days and "slices like butter," said Meredith, adding that all cuts are from local farms. This was from the five-generation farm, Peterson Craftsman Meats, located in Osceola, Wisconsin. The farm's cattle go through a proprietary dry-aging process after harvest, accounting for the Limousin beef's striking bold flavor and delicacy. Moreover, Peterson farm has a heart – calves born in a spring blizzard have been known to be kept in the family house for a few hours to warm-up.

To keep the table interesting, we also ordered the pan-seared scallops with asparagus, smoked cream and crisp mushroom. The scallop's crispy skins were easily pierced to yet more buttery-textures and taste. A brittle mass of mushrooms was heaped over the dish making for a rewarding treasure hunt as we fished out the scallops beneath.

We paired the rib cap with blistered shishito peppers, which set the layered meat off well, especially with its XO sauce and umami undertones. Carbs – we didn't forget them: roasted potatoes smothered in smoked Gouda, another Tullibee mainstay. It was richly satisfying.

Overall, the food was "so clean," my photographer noted, which I thought perfectly summed up each dish we sampled. "There's no aftertaste."

Tullibee's Gjetost ice cream sundae / Photo: Theo Page

For a light topper, we shared the Gjetost ice cream sundae with lingonberry, krumkake and white chocolate – another signature dish. The lingonberries were not quite as tartly sour as they're known for, which was fine by me. My decaf arrived in a glass cup fit with a woolen sleeve branded with Minnesota's Faribault Woolen Mill Co., established in 1865.

I loved that cozy touch.

Hewing Hotel

Tullibee / dinner menu

Top photo courtesy Hewing Hotel / All other photos: Theo Page

This entry was posted on Wednesday, November 6th, 2019 at 1:31 pm and is filed under Food, Lifestyle
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.