Cultural Daily

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Twin Cities Culinary Scene: The Lexington

R. Daniel Foster · Thursday, October 18th, 2018

Farm to table cuisine has forever been trending in the Twin Cities before certain foods were even said to be trending. No wonder the Minnesota cities are culinary standouts. *Esquire* magazine, in fact, terms Minneapolis "the food world's best-kept secret."

I hail from St. Paul, and whenever I visit, I check out the foodie scene. Food trucks are popular, as are donut shops. If you visit, stop in at Glam Doll donuts (Nicollet Ave. and in NE Minneapolis). Try the Pinup Girl – a bourbon-infused apple fritter. There's also a version with bacon. Get that one (obviously). The NE location also serves brunch and hot plates.

If you're lucky, you'll run into a donut truck, specifically Sssdude-Nutz run by Bradley Taylor and Ashley Peterson. The pair specializes in square donuts with intriguing names and superb taste combos: Old Dirty Bastard (chocolate glazed with crumbled Oreos) and Oh Fu$$k Yah (chocolate glazed topped with toffee and salted caramel).

Fine dining? There's lots of it. Joan's in the Park in St. Paul's Highland Park tops my list. Owned by Joan Schmitt and chef Susan Dunlop, the restaurant has a from-scratch kitchen that turns out bread, butter, sauces, cheeses, and desserts – all made daily in large deck ovens. There are no broilers, fryers or sauté stations. The hospitality and food are exceptional. Don't leave without trying the signature brown butter pudding.

The Lexington | Photo courtesy The Lexington

The Lexington in St. Paul

There's one St. Paul institution that I had always longed to try: The Lexington, a gussied up supper club on Grand Ave. that launched in 1935. Its ornate balconies and grand entrance plastered onto a boring brick facade seemed to me majestic and swanky – at least when I was a boy. As a young adult, it struck me as pretentious.

As an older adult, it seems about right for the 20,000-square-foot space that in its heyday hosted cigar-swirled political dinners (the Governor's mansion is a few blocks away). The Lex, as locals call it, had closed in 2013 after nearly 80 years of operation.

Fortunately, the restaurant reopened last February with chef Jack Riebel – he grew up a stone's throw from the restaurant and, for about a quarter-century, made his mark in Minneapolis (Goodfellow's, the Dakota, Butcher & The Boar).

Riebel teamed with Josh Thoma and Kevin Fitzgerald to bring back the venerable Lex. Their task was obvious: make what was old, new again.

The Williamsburg room | Photo courtesy The Lexington

A multi-million dollar restoration

The $5.5 million investment shows: gone is the staid decor (ceiling tiles and frumpy chairs). The superb art and chandeliers were freshened, as was the maple woodwork, some done in Colonial-revival style. The new S-shaped main bar is set with inviting sky blue-tufted banquets. There's also a new 40-seat rooftop patio and bar for warmer months.

The former private Williamsburg room features a moss Chesterfield sofa with matching wing chairs. The stained glass is restored, the shifting Grand Ave. stoplights mottled behind its diamond pattern glass. The handsome room is set with a grand piano; a jazz combo plays on Friday and Saturday nights.

Minneapolis-based ESG Architecture & Design mastered the transformation. Among its wisest moves: pulling out a truckload of rotted wood from the back dining room (the damage was discovered after prying off the outer boards).

The Chef's dining room | Photo courtesy The Lexington

Painted an elegant gray, the room is now modernized as the chef's dining room. Wide windows display the kitchen hubbub to diners. In a previous era, that would have been a disgraceful show of labor. Times have thankfully changed.

An astounding beef tartar starts the meal

We started with the spicy beef tartar – a layered punch of salted mango, toasted rice, and crispy shallot. This Thai variation on an old favorite was superb: deeply flavorful with a mix of textures that kept my interest high. I wanted another. Our entire table did. It was a great start.

Spicy beef tartar | Photo courtesy The Lexington

The beet salad prepared with quark cheese, pumpernickel crisps and caraway could have been good, but it was hard to tell with the stringent dressing that overpowered with its vinegary bite. The soup du jour was squash with shrimp, which was an optimal blend of delicate tastes. A dining companion said the shrimp was overkill, but I liked the variation, having just put some lobster in a carrot soup back home. It was an odd, but sort of wonderful combo.

More lobster. We also tried the Lobster a'la Diavlo (spaghetti, Maine lobster, roast tomato, chile flake) that was on the right side of spicy. A nudge in the other direction and it would have failed – perfect calibration.

Lobster a'la Diavlo | Photo courtesy The Lexington

French-Vietnamese gravitas

The Beef Pot Au Pho is a riff on French pot au feu, the last word signaling its Vietnamese variation. Riebel terms it as a “French pot roast done Vietnamese style.” The dish is cooked for 12 hours, which turns the beef superbly delicate. The flavors don’t announce themselves in your mouth, they pounce: bok choy, mint, sesame spaetzle, rich mushrooms and a heap of herbs.

The pot packed a real punch: deeply savory with a kind of gravitas – a noun I’ve never used to describe food. Each bite I took was ponderous in terms of heavy flavors. I didn’t dislike it; I was more astonished than anything else.

As with any supper club, The Lexington’s portions are substantial. Doggie bags fly out the door.

Other favorites on the menu that have been reported by diners: most any of the steaks, the chicken pot pie with its delectable crust as well as the liver and onions (both dishes are perennial traditions) and the beer-battered onion rings: thin and crispy with a flavored crunch. There have been mixed reports on the sweet onion bouillon made with sage with a side of Gouda toast.

The supper club tradition

Before the Grand Ave. building became The Lexington, it was a speakeasy, which fits into the mold of Midwest supper clubs born of the prohibition. While you’ll find copious amounts of dark wood at The Lexington, you won’t spot the usual taxidermy featured in the joints. Many were paired with resorts and located in adjacent Wisconsin, which has an official “Supper Club Day.”

The family-run eateries became popular in the 1950s and 60s because one could drink (and boy did they) out in the woods where few could witness. There were other factors, but booze, steak, and seafood consumed while watching lakeside sunsets was in itself enough of a winning combination.

Drunk driving campaigns helped spell supper clubs’ demise. But the hit T.V. show Mad Men and the midcentury modern craze helped bring some back, including The Lexington. St. Paul is better for its resurrection.

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The Lexington | 1096 Grand Ave, St Paul, MN 55105 | (651) 289-4990

Reservations
Top photo courtesy The Lexington

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