

A Tower Achievement at Porter & Frye

By RICK NELSON, Star Tribune

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No one else cooks like Steven Brown.

First impressions from his dinner menu at **Porter & Frye**, the new restaurant inside the Hotel Ivy + Residences in downtown Minneapolis, might understandably be otherwise. At least given its opening salvo, an ahi tuna appetizer. Hasn't that been done, oh, a thousand times?

Not like this, a joyous example of Brown's unique ability to twist the familiar into the novel. He barely chars the yellowfin before fanning slices of it against a pile of wrinkly, finger-like Japanese peppers, their hot bite tempered by the coolly acidic pang of preserved lemon. While your taste buds are reveling in the maverick combination, your eyes are soaking up the color-wheel relationship between the tuna's crimson and the peppers' deep avocado. Then your tongue catches a final kicker, the tickle of lime-scented salt. It's a synopsis of the novel that Brown and his gifted crew seem to be writing: "Love at First Taste."

When Brown announced that he was going to run the restaurant at the super-luxury hotel, I had two thoughts. The first was celebratory; this most maverick of chefs was going to have a home that sounded well-suited to his outsized talents, at least on paper. The second was worry: Would the Brownian imagination be flattened under the crushing weight of a hotel's 24-hour demands and lowest-common-denominator expectations?

The answer, at least so far, is a big fat "No." Just look at the brilliant soups, each one rethinking the genre's fundamentals without making the results unrecognizable. The components of a French onion soup are given separate-yet-equal treatment, so while it may appear to be something other than a traditional French onion soup, it tastes like the best one imaginable. A celery bisque, the exact color of those pale green hydrangeas we'll be seeing soon, is a similar joy ride. It has three ingenious accents -- sweet carrots, diced with a bonsai-like precision; deliciously fatty pork belly, and crunchy, nutty popped wild rice -- and each spoonful turned celery (neglected in other, lesser kitchens as a dietary dullard) into a flavor sensation.

The surprises pop up everywhere, but, unlike your in-laws landing at your door unannounced, these unexpected flavor, texture and color juxtapositions are entirely welcome. A pork terrine is a striking piece of sculpture on the outside, splendidly rustic on the inside. A plate of paper-thin cured meats and roasted grapes is arranged like an architectural model stolen from the Rem Koolhaas studio. Kumquats and roasted beets in a stunningly composed arugula salad are so close in color that they try to pass as mischievous twins. Smoky bacon is tamed to just the right grace note for juicy scallops.

I loved the explosion of color that pureed carrots gave to a plate of big, meaty prawns.

Somehow Brown made chickpeas glamorous while manipulating them with beautifully seared arctic char. Rather than a gigantic slab of meat on the plate, lamb was done two ways, as a chop and as a roulade. Where others might be content to remain merely dutiful, Brown & Co. stay inspired with basics: superb roast chicken exploded with bone-deep chicken flavor, and crab legs, stacked on a platter like logs, were barely adorned and hugely succulent. Even something so boilerplate as meat and potatoes impressed.

Sure, I wasn't wild about a few dull vegetarian dishes, truffles wrestled the flavor of swordfish right to the ground, walleye landed with a thud (although, frankly, when doesn't it?), and if diners follow the menu's advice and inquire after the tasting menu, they learn there isn't one, at least not yet. But Juliette Lelchuk's exquisite desserts -- which extend the kitchen's deconstructivist leanings to their fullest degree -- have the power to gloss over almost any disappointment.

Lunch borrows a few stellar dinner items and adds cleverly packaged sandwiches (don't miss the gaudily decadent burger, the shrimp roll and a Reuben fit for the gods, all served with excellent fries) and a few lavishly topped oval-shaped pizzas. I'm not quite sold on breakfast, though; \$22 is a lot to pay for a plate of scrambled eggs followed by a trip to a pleasant but brief buffet, although its gravlax, charcuterie and mini-pastries were pretty swell.

Service, for the most part, is smooth and gracious, but I encountered annoying hiccups -- missing flatware, an AWOL bread basket, I-think-we've-been-forgotten stretches between courses, getting a sheepish "We're out of espresso" and ordering one dish, receiving another and being billed for a third -- that should be foreign territory for a restaurant with \$49 entrees.

The setting also has its issues. Comparisons to Chambers Kitchen are probably inevitable, since both share so many characteristics: hotel restaurants, historic buildings, street-level bars over basement dining rooms. But where Chambers Kitchen pulls off stylish and hip without so much as breaking a sweat, Porter & Frye feels as if it could be converted into a HOM furniture showroom on a moment's notice.

OK, maybe that's a little harsh, because there are assets in play. The Ivy Tower's 1930 interior was a rotted-out wreck, so Walsh Bishop Associates, the hotel's Minneapolis architects, stripped whatever was left down to the building's rough concrete superstructure, a nice touch. Bar and dining room are connected by an entrance-making glass-and-steel staircase. Dark oak floors play well against white walls interrupted by occasional bursts of warm autumnal colors. Chairs and curvaceous booths are designed for maximum comfort, and the dining room's tables are spaced for privacy.

But my attention wanders in the street-level bar. First, to the windows, where I'd mentally compose a shopping list: a jumbo bottle of Windex, followed by some sheer curtains for softening the harsh view of Orchestra Hall's nightmare of a parking ramp. Then I'd focus on the door, as I watched customers try to figure out how to enter (clue: not from the street, which would seem logical, but through the hotel's beige-on-beige lobby). And the name. There's no Porter, there's no Frye, and that made-up moniker only adds to the feeling that, paraphrasing Gertrude Stein, there isn't enough there there.

It's a weird disconnect; the hotel's self-professed five-star trappings don't seem to have trickled down into its restaurant. Although maybe it's by design that the splurge isn't on the walls but on the plate, because anyone enjoying Brown's food will feel like a million bucks.

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