

## Reds

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Reds

77 Adelaide St. W., Toronto. 416-862-7337. Dinner for two with wine, tax and tip, \$175.

At the turn of the century, when Reds opened in First Canadian Place, I wrote the following in this space: "Reds opened exactly one month ago, and became almost instantly sold out. What does that tell us about young financiers and where they wear their taste buds? (Kinda low for salivary glands . . .)

"Reds (whose name is based on its encyclopedic list of extremely nicely priced red wines) is owned by the people who brought us Alice Fazooli's, Far Niente and Al Frisco's. Which explains a lot. As P.T. Barnum might have said, there is no underestimating the gastronomic credulity of the young downtowner with more money than taste buds -- if you dress it up right."

I hated the food, and ended that column: "Reds' success is all about something that is not served on a plate. Call it style, call it branding, call it decorating, call it marketing. But don't call it cooking."

And they heard me! It took almost seven years, but how wonderful that Reds is now trying to rebrand itself as a restaurant that puts food very high on the agenda. In 2006, they hired as chef Michael Steh, who had been sous-chef at Splendido, a very serious restaurant. Chef Steh has constructed an ambitious menu that pays good attention to seasonal and local ingredients. He invokes other important food trends: Yes, there's foam; the provenance of ingredients is mentioned on the menu; and among post-prandial offerings is a plethora of raw-milk cheeses from the Cheese Boutique.

It's clear Steh can cut it gastronomically. He hits the high notes often enough to prove it: His crab cakes are innocent of cereal, made with actual Dungeness crab, with a subtle green-curry undertone. Beside them is a clever play on celery, wherein he has shaved it paper-thin (which brings out celery's lovely flavour) and added rich peanut and coriander chutney. Equally charming is a clever combo of sweet, smoky and piquant tuna carpaccio with marvellous smoked cherry tomatoes, superbly tender octopus and tiny olives.

Chef's gnocchi are more robust than one might wish, but their nicely sautéed mushroom topping has enough sharp pecorino to make a good statement. We will take a pass on the roasted shrimp bisque. Maybe Steh is a reincarnation of a fifties chef

and he just had to have one item wherein butterfat stands in for flavour. This is it: All cream, no shrimp, with retro puff pastry crackers afloat on top (until they get soggy and drown).

But the service doesn't match the kitchen's ambitions. We stood in line to check our coats, and had to trot to keep up with the maître d' who led us (at a run) to our table at the far end of the very large dining room. It isn't the wait staff's fault that nobody trained them on the grace notes of upscale cuisine -- or the French pronunciation. We ask our waiter about the character of a wine. "I don't know. I've never tasted it. I'll get the sommelier," he says, pronouncing the last word like an African country.

On the menu, they offer to shave white truffles on eggs en cocotte and just about anything else you want. When I ask for some of the heavenly fungus, the waiter says: "We don't have any extra truffles." In the day of file/print/okay, we find it inexcusable to offer fresh shaved truffles all over the menu and not have them. It increases our ambivalence.

Still, Reds remains a gorgeous room, a symphony in stone, rough-hewn pine and etched glass. The visual theme is faux rustic. From etched-glass booth dividers to thick pine beams and buttresses, the room is open and bright. Despite its large size, the look speaks of the casual intimacy of Lotus Land.

And the new chef is clever: It is a fine invention to smoke duck magret lightly, cook it rare and build harmonies with cooked-down plum compote and delicate roasted Cookstown turnips. On the side is a cute little iron casserole of bread stuffing scented with small chunks of duck confit. Although I prefer my bone marrow naked, in which guise its sinful self shines brightest, Steh cannot be faulted for mixing marrow with meaty porcini and painting the result as a tasty crust on superb Kansas City beef tenderloin. This guy loves meat. His Cumbrae Farms lamb is juicy, red and tender. But forgiveness is required for both the dry chèvre soufflé and the too-weird mint applesauce that looks like green mystery purée.

Maybe chef should stick to meat and fowl, for his lobster is slightly overcooked. For my \$37, slightly overcooked is like "a little bit pregnant." Its accompanying black rice risotto is dry rice with no sauce, and we can't find the advertised chamomile tea foam. Given the personality of chamomile tea, that may be a mercy.

Impeccable raw-milk cheeses aged by the Cheese Boutique arrive room temperature and properly accompanied by fruit/nut bread and dried apricots, but the so-called onion jam isn't. Rather, it's barely sautéed onions in sweet brown glop.

Holy schizophrenic kitchen! Reds can't decide whether it's going for greatness or settling for mediocrity.

Private chef Ezra Title (who is very, very good) is offering a scrumptious Valentine's Day home feast. For \$65 a person, he'll deliver dinner to your home. It will be idiot-proof, ready to reheat and made from mostly local ingredients. It will include printed menus, homemade truffles and detailed instructions for easy preparation. The dinner includes the likes of braised short ribs, lobster gratin, chocolate banana napoleon and Meyer lemon panna cotta with blood oranges and almond shortbread. Light the candles, open a bottle of wine and gloat. E-mail [ezra@chezvousdining.ca](mailto:ezra@chezvousdining.ca) or call 416-347-3609.

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