

At 10 p.m., your table turns into a pumpkin

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SATORI SUPPER CLUB

735 Queen St. W., Toronto. 416-860-1551. Dinner for two with wine, tax and tip, \$175.

A supper club sounds like a pretty cool thing. Jeez, we could dress up and stay up and maybe even dance? Could we be party people?

With that thought in mind, we get six fun-loving people together and book a table at the new Satori Supper Club for 7:30 on a Saturday night. At first, the reservationist demurs, saying we can dine either at 6 or at 10 p.m. No thanks. She then changes her mind and says we can have the 7:30 table, but cautions that we have to be on time. Easy.

Which in no way softens the blow when a guy comes to the table at 10:03 p.m. and says, albeit politely, that we have to leave because someone else has the table booked.

Point one: At no time during the reservation-taking process did the receptionist say she would need the table back at a certain time. Telling us to be on time may, in some people's books, suffice. But last time I checked, being a rocket scientist wasn't a prerequisite for going out to dinner. Point two: Our bill for dinner for six was \$575, including tax and tip. Is this how a smart restaurateur really wants to treat people who have just dropped the price of some people's monthly food budget on dinner?

Perhaps Richard Bailey, who recently opened Satori Supper Club (where the short-lived Habitat used to be), has been spoiled by his other venue, the Fifth, where big spenders recline on puffy white couches and vibrate their platinum cards at high frequency on the likes of serious Scotch and cigars. Maybe Satori's insta-popularity has already gone to Bailey's head. Every table in the place fills, all with folks young enough to be my progeny. A restaurateur could be forgiven for thinking that being overrun with thirtysomethings guarantees longevity, but guess again: This is Queen Street West and Satori is the flavour du jour. Tomorrow is another day.

Serious restaurateurs think ahead. Turns out, says the door-chick, that the bar will be hopping until 3 a.m., but the kitchen closes at 10:30. Which is why they needed to turn our table. Mightn't it have been better business to beg the cooks to stay later, buy drinks for the people waiting and keep customers happy?

If the dinner had been fab, my ire would be less strident. For Queen Street, it's great food. For Toronto, it's good. The portions are huge, which affords opportunity for bargain eating.

Forget apps, forget dessert, a main course (max \$28) is a big dinner.

The sole starter that startles is Satori salad, a remake of *frisée aux lardons*.

In place of the traditional poached egg in this salad, a super-crisp, deep-fried perfectly poached egg tops asparagus, *frisée* and smoky bacon in vinaigrette made sexy with truffle oil.

Other apps, merely competent, are leek and potato soup, tender braised lamb shank, pumpkin ravioli in brown butter with toasted hazelnuts and a shrimp trio of ceviche (slightly bland), grilled shrimp (slightly overcooked) and dumpling (slightly dry). Beef carpaccio is what happened when respectable raw steak met chopped egg. Feh.

The old Habitat has morphed into such a lovely room that one wants to linger. The front is still a booming bar (with loud music kicking in hard at 10ish), but in the back dining area one wall is covered with mirrored portholes framed in gilt against a dusty azure background, for a look of grandeur and grace. Would that the main courses lived up to the room.

Confit of chicken is confusing: Confit is fowl cooked (and crisped) in its own fat, but this confit features pale flaccid skin and ho-hum flesh. Another item is somewhat overcooked poached grouper. The kitchen does a better job bringing strong flavour to mushroom and asparagus risotto. And steak is their big love: Tenderloin is smothered in a splendid buttery crab-inflected *béarnaise* and strip loin is another big bold steak, perfectly cooked and beautifully seasoned. Methinks this kitchen may be too fond of meat: Undistinguished scallops are overwhelmed by a thick sauce made from shredded chorizo in tomato sauce, a sophomoric attempt at the exotic.

For dessert, the sweets are nice, not notable, but the "warm cheese with phyllo pastry" is weird melted cheese wrapped in dry phyllo. We ask the server what the cheese is. "Byzine," quoth he. We ask where it's from. "Italy." We ask again, for never have any of us, cheeseaholics all, met a cheese of that name (in Italy or anywhere else). He insists on both. Then they bring the cheque (unbidden), ask us twice to pay it, and say we can hang out at the bar if we want. Is this the new definition of hospitality?

Be my Valentine: Again this year, the wonderful chef Ezra Title is delivering you-cook-it gourmet dinners (including printed menus and detailed instructions for easy preparation). Shazam, it's a romantic dinner at home for \$65 a person (plus a \$20 supplement for lobster). The menu includes the likes of short ribs, lobster pot pie and molten chocolate bread pudding.
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