

RESTAURANT REVIEW » QUEEN WEST

The fyood at Nyood is very gyood

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ON THE MENU***jkates@globeandmail.com***NYOOD***1096 Queen St. West, Toronto.
416-466-1888. Dinner for two with
wine, tax and tip, \$125.*

When people go to the hottest restaurant in town, entertaining psychological tics can erupt: First we get insecure because we can't pronounce the name. Nyood is pronounced nude. Second we ask: Am I cool enough to be here at this unpronounceable restaurant? Third question: Who (else) is here who's cool? Ooh, there's Michael Budman, the Roots czar, at the bar. Fourth ques-

tion: Since cool is never enough, will this place have a future or is it just about this month?

The guiding hand of restaurateur Hanif Harji almost guarantees that this place has legs ongoing, for he is not only this town's uber coolmeister, he also has a great palate. Save for his one miscalculation, the un-delicious Doku 13 in the Cosmopolitan Hotel (more on that location's new persona anon), Harji's restaurants have been both delicious and successful: Blowfish continues to delight sushi-vores and beautiful people; Kultura is that rare combo of gorgeous with fabulous food; and Harji partnered with Claudio Aprile to open Colborne Lane, which is in Toronto's top 10.

The latter relationship went up in spectacular flames. Aprile and Harji had planned to open Bar Crudo together in the spot where Nyood is now, but their partnership fell apart, got ugly, and Harji kept the space. Which is gorgeous, understated, cool, quietly luxe, fun. We love the double-height, stainless-steel and glass French doors at the front, and the huge chandelier made from thick black wires and utility lights – the kind the mechanic takes under the hood of your car. Putting it beside white Murano glass chandeliers and a wall of nooks holding whitewashed books is an act of design whimsy.

Chef Roger Mooking, who has done such delectable work at Kultura, is exec chef

at Nyood, and his culinary imprimatur is on every plate. Nyood's fare, the inevitable tapas, is as wonderful as Kultura's, every dish sparkling with flavour and texture, every item a small jewel.

Mooking's octopus is startling in its tenderness. He tosses it with blood orange, shaved crisped Jerusalem artichokes and exotic olives, adding fresh basil leaves at the last minute. It is an homage to fresh and tangy. Arctic char tartare is chewy chunks of impeccably fresh char served on a creamy tomato purée, with baby coriander seedlings and dots of crème fraîche. In beet salad he emphasizes the sweetness of beets with apple, chèvre and young watercress.

Chef cures thinly sliced steak with olives, which leaves

it raw but builds a thin crust of olive piquancy, and serves it over shaved citrus-marinated fennel with grilled young radicchio. He has a suite of five flatbreads built on tender house-made dough. I like the mushroom flatbread in particular because 1) anyone who puts gorgonzola cheese on an exotic mushroom has my vote, and 2) cremini and king oyster mushrooms both have sturdy texture that stands up extremely well to high oven heat.

Mooking's chicken cassoulet knocks the cover all the way off that ball. I often find cassoulet heavy, indeed leaden. This version, thanks perhaps to the clever choice of chicken (lighter than the traditional duck) is delicate but rich in flavour, with a faint hint of

cinnamon in the background. But his cherry pork roulade is the pièce de résistance. Mooking has wrapped a thick slice of pork tenderloin in prosciutto, roasted it until it's perfectly pink and fork-tender, and served it topped with a small dab of intense cherry compote and a basil leaf, producing flavours that feel like a spring bouquet on the tongue.

A chef who can make such beautiful pork is guaranteed a place in my culinary pantheon. That his parade of complex little bijoux proceeds at a snail's pace from the open kitchen is annoying, but one hopes that given the restaurant's youth (it opened Feb. 15), the kitchen brigade will learn to show as much respect for our time as they do for our taste buds.