

Dipping in the L2O

By Michael Nagrant

POUR MY BEER IN A SOLO CUP and give me a spit-roasted pork taco and I'm a happy man. It's not that I don't appreciate luxury dining, but the balance between food and other details at the high end has increasingly tipped toward silly. Given the current climate, it's probably only a matter of time before someone offers high colonics in lieu of a post-meal digestif.

Couple this kind of silliness with \$4 gas prices, disappearing rice and wheat, increased prices on European wines, and top it all with \$20-plus pizzas, and it's enough to make a food lover grab a leg of prosciutto and a wheel of Parmigiano-Reggiano and head for a cave.

For this less hearty, relatively poor writer, it's almost enough for me to consider impaling myself on a Wusthof knife. Throw in the opening of L2O on May 14, a pricey uber-high-end seafood boutique (or would that be nautique?) from Alain Ducasse protege Laurent Gras and Mr. Jonathan Livingston Seafood, Richard Melman, aka chairman of Lettuce Entertain You, and I was sure Samurai-style Seppuku was in store.

While I scraped together the ducats for a visit to L2O, I followed Gras' pre-opening blog and noted his casual mentions of his \$400 mandoline, his Leica camera and how he took inspiration from John Galliano haute couture and Oprah's favorite cobbler, the retailer of red soles, Christian Louboutin (\$1,200 pumps anyone?).

Then there were the glamour shots of the rumpiled spiky-haired bedroom-eyed Gras in the local media. Oh, did I mention the YouTube videos of the chef in his black chef's jacket commanding his brigade of white-shirted underlings? Hell, even the name L2O, a cutesy mash-up of Laurent and H2O (seafood swims in it, ha), rankled me.

It's a good thing I'm more of a features writer than a critical reviewer, because my objectivity wasn't just out the window. It was thrown out through the plate glass of the 95th floor of the Hancock building's Signature Lounge into Lake Michigan after too many of their signature Sidecars. I was sure I wasn't going to like L2O.

Skip to the hours after my first meal there, and now I'm wondering if L2O is Chicago's best restaurant. It's definitely Chicago's best restaurant opening since Alinea. In fact L2O is probably what you'd get if you threw Napa Valley's French Laundry, New York's sushi dream theater Masa, TRU and Alinea into a blender and poured it out in the old Ambria space in the Belden-Stratford Hotel.

Gras' raw presentations, like a scrim of translucent fluke garnished with swooshes of basil seed, a zingy lemon vinegar and a many hours of my salary in Osetra caviar, have potentially ruined regular sushi for me. I haven't found many local sushi chefs who express a balance of flavors or have the margins to outfit raw fish with luxury accoutrements like Gras.

Luxury is not the separating factor at L2O, though. Anyone can scoop fat quenelles of raw fish eggs from a tin. Like most successful high-end restaurants, L2O's singularity is more about superior imagination, attention to detail and challenging of convention, even with commodity ingredients. Take pork belly. It's the caprese salad of 2007, a high-end menu ubiquity. Gras' succulent version coated with duck fat and drizzled with black truffle jus is the best one in our little Hogbutcher to the World. The skin was a true cracklin' beating out the best bodega or corner taqueria chicharon.

There's also the best bread service in all of Chicago. L2O's not hawking the wares of respectable third-party vendors. Instead, Gras' right-hand-man Francis Brennan is cooking up micro-baguettes with chewy crumb and rich crunchy crust, creamy pan au lait, mini-anchovy-stuffed croissant and bacon-infused bread twists, each a best-in-class example.

One of the tools used to make this great bread is L2O's Pavailler, a steam-injected stone-floored oven that ensures a quick airy rising crumb that doesn't dry out. While I have no doubt much money was spent on non-food-related expenses at L2O, a significant part of the restaurant budget was out-laid for cooking tools. There's a Hawaiian ice shaver, which turns out delicate green tea ice. There's the rare Clover machine that allows a barista to adjust coffee brewing parameters on the fly to create fast richly intense cups of brewed Intelligentsia coffee. There's also a Belgian machine that turns out creamy sweet butter.

On the non-food investment front, Gras partnered with designer Martin Kastner of Crucial Detail to produce custom service pieces for the restaurant, including a riff on the traditional butter bell. Instead of the typical conceit of lifting a cloche-shaped piece of porcelain to reveal a pat of butter on a flat plate, in Kastner's piece, a dome of butter hangs upside down inside a round translucent hockey-puck-shaped container. When bread arrives, the server flips the top part, turning the butter orb right-side-up.

The interior of L2O, designed by Chicago architect Dirk Denison, which features low-slung brown leather Le Corbusier-inspired banquettes and dividers made of tensioned wire that you wanna get up and pluck as if they were a guitar, is redefining. The trend has been to build restaurants in converted residential spaces, which, in theory, capture the intimacy of a real house. The reality is that these spots, with their limited ceiling heights and narrow city-lot-wide floor plans, are confining and make you aware of your neighbors. The soaring scale of the L2O dining room and the clever use of architectural elements to divide the room create real and imagined separation that feels more intimate and inspiring.

Not everything is perfect. Lobster, which was slow-poached in butter sous vide-style, was incongruously chewy and the accompanying Tahitian vanilla bean sauce tasted like walking mouth-open into an errant perfume spritz. Using gold-leaf flecks and the occasional ring-mold-style plating were tired tricks. Servers repeatedly bumped a diner's chair at the table across from mine and walked by a woman's shawl that had fallen on the floor.

On the other hand, there were no crazy-haired or obnoxious aloof know-it-all hipster waiters slumming at L2O. The waitstaff was smart, fun, encouraging and engaging, and Chantelle Pabros might be the most accessible and knowledgeable sommelier since Alpana Singh worked the gold and alabaster at Everest.

L2O has already reached the rarefied confines of Alinea, Trotter's, Tru and NoMI. If Gras, who insists on doing almost everything in-house, resists settling into a groove, L2O may eventually stand alone with Alinea as the best and most innovative restaurant in town.

Like Green Zebra, which redefined what it means to eat vegetarian, L2O redefines seafood-focused dining. Until L2O, there was no apparent transitional-dining experience between Thomas Keller and Grant Achatz. Gras' cooking is a bridge between old-school Michelin three-star dining and the so-called "science food." I think people will go to L2O and be comfortable with the more classic preparations and open themselves up to Gras' more creative dishes. His excellent key lime dessert, a study in different forms and textures of citrus, would be home at Alinea, and it might just embolden more timid folks to try other restaurants focused solely on post-modern gastronomy.

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