

eat & drink

Chef Joseph Heppé is one to watch at Oak & Char

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE
God damn the bloomers.

I know you want to know what exactly that means, but we can't talk about vintage undergarments until we discuss where I am, which is the old Graham Elliot restaurant space in River North. It is now Oak & Char, a new restaurant from former Untitled partner Art Mendoza and former Untitled executive chef Joseph Heppé. When I think of Untitled, I think of bros, beers and beef. All of these things are fine, especially on a trying weekday night when you need some suds-and-steak sustenance, but this was the weekend. I was on a hot date. I was looking for some adventurous food and ambience, not bass and burgers.

There is progress. Unlike the name Untitled, which feels like a failure in creativity, Oak & Char is at least specific, connoting something outdoorsy and smoky. Then again, I'm still left wondering if this new restaurant is built on the idea of what it's like to dine inside a bourbon barrel. Will there be a simulated forest fire mid-meal? Who can say? The only way to really know was to stop in and find out.

Granny knickers forever

So, back to the bloomers. The first thing I noticed after stepping inside Oak & Char is that there were at least 30 light fixtures—some hanging from the ceiling, others banquette-mounted lamps—all wrapped in saggy, pleated white sheets. The place looks like what I imagine the laundry room at an Old West brothel must have been like. One or two of these fixtures would have been cool, but the entire room is overkill. I was worried I would be suffocated by underwear.

This was not lost on the Oak & Char team. "Oh, you mean the granny panties?" Heppé said. "Yeah, some of us were on the fence about those. It was maybe about 50/50 with us, and now it's about 60/40 [in favor] with our customers. Jordan, the designer, said that they offered a touch of femininity to the space. We figured they'd be controversial, but it's good to get people talking."

The "Jordan" of whom Heppé speaks is Jordan Mozer, a designer known for whimsical restaurant and hotel interiors. I'm not sure I agree with the call on the light treatments here, but Mozer's brilliance is on display in the live-edge wooden dining tables

(which come from a single fallen tree according to Heppé) and the charred wood-plank lined walls Mozer created by torching lumber in his backyard. The custom hardware, including black-metal oak leaf door pulls, is also pretty cool.

Just Jerrod

If I've spent too much time hating on the bloomers, it's because they were basically the only thing wrong with my dinner. My server, Jerrod, was the best server I have had

in Chicago this year. He was opinionated, engaged and knowledgeable. He introduced himself by saying, "Hi, I'm Jerrod ... like The Galleria of Jewelry. I'll be your server for the evening." I know this sounds cheesy and premeditated, but the way he delivered the line as he poured my wine (Oak & Char was BYOB when I visited, but has since received its liquor license) felt spontaneous. Jerrod was charming and disarming. The ice broken, he confirmed that the ravioli and the duck must be had.

Poultry power

Jerrod was right. The duck (\$26) is hung to dry in front of a fan for days in the restaurant's walk-in cooler and is splashed with Rittenhouse rye and left to cure some more. Its flavors were concentrated like a dry-aged steak, and its flesh was spicier and richer than your average duck. The rare, juicy meat was enhanced by a sweet smear of concord grape jam and a drizzle of duck liver vinaigrette.

Even better than the duck are the MSG chicken wings (\$7). Before you protest that

Midwestern melting pot



Hot toddies for two at Oak & Char
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE PHOTOS



MSG chicken wings

you're allergic to the stuff or it gives you headaches, know that the MSG in question is not the salty Chinese takeout staple, but a word play on the chicken's glaze ingredients, which include maple syrup, sherry and gochujang, or Korean red pepper paste. If there is a better chicken wing in Chicago, I haven't had it. Heppe said these wings were inspired by the popular Seoul Sassy-marinated wings from Crisp (also one of my favorites). "We tried confiting the chicken and a bunch of other techniques, but the chicken was never as crisp or juicy as we liked it," he said. "So we just old-fashioned double-fried it." Heppe makes it sound like he's an aw-shucks southern grandma, but grandmas don't also mix glucose into their glaze to give it a thick, satisfying texture or coat their wings in a mix of potato starch and low-protein Wondra flour to create a super-crispy flaky pie-like crust when fried. The smoked-cilantro yogurt dipping sauce served underneath the MSG wings also rocks; it's a complex, imaginative equivalent to a cooling blue cheese sauce for a buffalo wing.

Heating up
Oak & Char
 217 W. Huron St.
 312-643-2427

One of my favorite dishes in Chicago was Mercat a la Planxa's shishito peppers served with salbitxada, a sauce similar to romesco featuring red pepper, vinegar and crunchy toasted bread bits. Heppe, who worked at Mercat, has updated the dish, creating a southern-inflected romesco dip for his shishito peppers (\$7) made with crushed peanuts instead of bread. He also shaves dehydrated Benton's country ham over the whole thing to add a wispy, smoky and salty component—think bacon floss.

Heppe days are here again

The only thing I didn't particularly love was a jar of cold-smoked oysters (\$13), pickled peppers and lemon served with buttery crackers. The dish wasn't bad, but the pickling juices overpowered any subtle notes of oyster flavor. That being said, if you can't tell, I'm a huge fan of Heppe. It's always fun to look forward to a new Paul Kahan joint or check out something from Stephanie Izard, but it's a special rush to experience the burgeoning talent of a chef that's relatively unknown—at least for now.

Bottom line

Joseph Heppe is a chef to watch. He honed his skills at Vermilion, Mercat a la Planxa and Untitled, but Oak & Char is the first time he's working unfettered and putting those influences together to create an exciting modern Midwestern melting-pot cuisine grounded in Asian, Spanish and American ingredients and technique. The food is exciting, the service is excellent and, except for those weird underwear chandeliers, the room is warm and inviting.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR.
 REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.
 REDEYE@TRIBUNE.COM | @REDEYEATDRINK



Light fixtures at Oak & Char



Rye-aged duck



Ravioli doppio

Rave-worthy ravioli and romesco

The ravioli doppio (\$16) had a fine custard-yellow hue and two chambers, one filled with a fine celery root puree and the other with maitake mushrooms. As I bit the pasta, which is blanketed in a gooey truffle fondue and encrusted with a smattering of hazelnut, the grassy celery flavor mingles with the earthy, almost soil-like musk of the mushroom and the creamy, nutty fondue. The combination coats my mouth in a comforting, soul-satisfying richness. If your life ever becomes a country song—i.e. you got fired, your wife left you and someone shot your dog—this is the pasta you should eat to salve those wounds.