

eat & drink

Shrimp succotash

HILARY HIGGINS PHOTOS FOR REDEYE



POMP IT TO ME

POMP & CIRCUMSTANCE BRINGS FORGETTABLE '50S, '60S FARE TO OLD TOWN

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

“When food was food & drinks were stiff.” That’s the tagline for Pomp & Circumstance, the new Old Town restaurant from The 8 Group principals Carmen Rossi, Chris Bader and Kevin Killerman (Hubbard Inn, Barn & Company and Heating & Cooling Pub). That phrase is supposed to evoke the ’50s and ’60s era heyday of Jack Kerouac and the “Mad Men” world of expense-account martinis and ring-a-ding-ding elegance. I stopped in recently to see if Pomp & Circumstance would stir up Rat Pack gentlemanliness or the drunken shenanigans of advertising and Wall Street’s les enfants terribles.

The scene

The ’50s were a time of thick steaks, icy martinis, stiff old fashioned, leather banquettes, smooth crooners and fawning service. Save

for the excellent cocktails, which we’ll get to in a bit, almost none of that is on offer at Pomp & Circumstance. The 8 Group’s Hubbard Inn is magnificent because it’s

transformative. It feels like a cross between a medieval castle and a bullfighter’s office. You can almost smell Ernest Hemingway’s aftershave. At Pomp, the confines are tiny. The front area has a bunch of stools and a wall-mounted sidebar, where it looks like a square dance might break out at any minute. The banquettes aren’t leather—or even pleather-lined—but instead tufted with some kind of black and gray tartan that looks like it may have come from the Harley-Davidson clan of Scotland. The bathrooms are lined with black lacquered wood paneling and decorative tile that looks like it came straight out of Home Depot. The trope of suspender-clad bartenders and obligatory Edith Piaf soundtrack felt played out. The restaurant

felt less like an escape and more like a poor man’s slapdash copy of Bavette’s.

The ’50s were also an era of the dutiful housewife and rampant misogyny. Even if the decor was good, the crass sexualization of servers here was impossible to ignore. Waitresses wore tight, slitted black skirts and plunging tank tops. I felt like I was at a slightly more elegant, veiled version of Tilted Kilt or Hooters.

The food

They don’t serve chicken wings at Pomp & Circumstance, but they do serve a crispy-crusted roast half chicken (\$20) on top of a lemon-drizzled nest of kale, a new-school mashup of kale and brussels sprouts. Though



The year-round patio at Pomp & Circumstance



Key lime bar



Sidecar cocktail



Watermelon Cooler

the chicken was juicy because of an overnight brine, it still needed a sprinkle of finishing salt as the outer roast crust was unseasoned. The kalette was actually quite magnificent, bursting with the promised kale and brussels sprout essence, but I'm not sure Jack Kerouac (an inspiration for the restaurant) would be caught dead eating a genetically modified hybrid green.

Crab rangoon (\$12) was made from store-bought wonton wrappers stuffed with fresh crab meat, cream cheese, garlic, lemongrass and celery. I liked the crunch of the celery, but the cream cheese overwhelmed the crab meat and garlic and lemongrass flavors. The filling, like the chicken, needed more salt. The dumpling wrappers were almost too clean and flavorless, like they'd been fried in virgin oil. The sweet chili dipping sauce, which is made in-house, had a nice burst of citrus, a good

touch of chili burn and a satisfying viscosity compared with jelly-like bottled sauces most take-out joints serve.

Asparagus and English pea soup (\$9) was garnished with a bracing mint cream and charred scallion relish, but the base was gloppy and needed thinning with a stock. The texture was like pudding and gave me flashbacks to my days of gumming down mushy Gerber peas.

The one dish that was unimpeachable was a succotash (\$17) featuring fresh kernels of corn, plump shrimp and a smoky swoosh of tomato puree.

Dessert

At odds with the "when food was food" theme was a jar of cheesecake dip (\$7) served with house-toffeeed graham crackers. I want a thick wedge of substantial cheesecake, not a wimpy whipped dip, which frankly could

have used more sugar. The presentation was the most disappointing reinvention of a classic since the infantile croque monsieur fingers they used to serve at Paris Club Bistro & Bar.

The jiggly key lime bar (\$7), perfumed with zest and bursting with lime juice, was everything key lime pie is supposed to be.

Service

Though we told our server we were sharing everything, she brought us the asparagus soup in a single bowl and didn't offer to split the portion or bring another bowl for sharing. She also cautioned us that the chicken would take 25 minutes to cook, as if she was advising against the order, which was odd considering we'd ordered three appetizers.

Cocktails

The Pomp & Circumstance crew did get one

portion of their tagline correct. Drinks here are indeed stiff, and classic. The Sidecar (\$13) was brisk, slightly sweet, rife with orange liquor and finished with a tart lemon kiss. Despite its frou-frou name, the Watermelon Cooler (\$13) was substantial, featuring satisfying scotch-like smoky and grassy notes imparted by Avion tequila and bitter rhubarb and orange tones from Aperol.

Bottom line

If Pomp & Circumstance is evocative of the '50s and '60s, it's the drunken, chauvinistic shenanigans of "Mad Men's" Roger Sterling. There's a half-hearted attempt to recreate an elegant supper club, but you'd likely have a better time hosting your own dinner party.

REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED, AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.

REVIEW Pomp & Circumstance

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★★★★★
Dead upon arrival

RATINGS KEY ★★★★★ DEAD UPON ARRIVAL ★★★★★ PROCEED WITH CAUTION ★★★★★ GIVE IT SOME TIME
★★★★ TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT ★★★★★ OFF TO A GOOD START ★★★★★ HEATING UP ★★★★★ ALREADY HOT