



diningout

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A 4-STAR IS ALMOST BORN

Chris Nugent's fascinating new Goosefoot comes close, but leans too much toward technique

When a restaurant is as fastidious and dedicated as Goosefoot, a new prize is only Ravenswood restaurant from former Les Nomades chef Chris Nugent, there's no question about whether it will be highly rated. The only question is whether it's earned four stars. This one came off so close.

Unlike some critics, I don't care much for fussy silverware, crisp silk draperies or fancy finishing-school waiters who've committed every wine region in the world to memory. That's all nice, but the restaurants of my dreams serve tasty and original well-executed food. Their chefs and owners have a thoughtful unique vision and the courage to pursue that vision even if that vision clashes with perceived standards. Nothing else really matters.

Of course, Goosefoot doesn't ignore standards. They trade in on all of them. Servers refold your napkins when you leave for the restroom. They sweep out forks and knives with each course. They understand Nugent's techniques and where ingredients come from. If they don't know, they ask. They serve a bunch of luxury ingredients, like lobster and scallops. (Unfortunately the former is a touch chewy and the latter a little gritty.) They pour wines into the proper type of glassware. And though Goosefoot is BYOB, servers can generally swap a little winespeak on a particular varietal.

Admittedly, if you don't know much about wine, the BYOB thing might be a negative, most four-star

restaurants provide sommelier "guardian angels" to take care of you if you don't. And anyway, Chef Nugent's food is so good, you could bring a wine bottle with a picture of a snowboarding griffle that you just picked up at 7-Eleven and the experience isn't diminished. (What does diminish things is when you've brought a dessert wine and you have to remind the kitchen halfway through the cheese-dessert portion of the menu that they still have it chilling in back.)

But guaranteeing four stars isn't about performing perfectly. Things happen. I once gave a great review to a restaurant that accidentally knocked a glass of red wine in my lap. You could pour a mugnum of Cabernet in my lap if you serve me Nugent's cheese course. The scrim of nutty/funky Pleasant Ridge Reserve (a Wisconsin cheese made in the style of Gruyere) propped up on a billowing sprig of a tapioca crisp enriched with a drizzle of celery truffle caponata and a dollop of mascarpone cream is the best composed cheese course I've had since Dale Levitski's "Grilled Cheese" at Sprout.

"Truffle is everywhere on Goosefoot's menu, including a "dehydrated" truffle powder, served on a disk of seared Angus beef. (Truffle oil is mixed with a modified food starch called tapioca malto-dextrin that deglazes the oil, allowing a fluffy powder to form.) When the powder hits your tongue, it explodes in tiny explosions, like a bunch of Dippin' Dot ice cream pellets landing your mouth. It's strange, but interesting. You now



committed every movie theater should have this on hand as a popcorn topping.

Though the truffle is exciting, the beef feels obligatory — Chicago has enough steakhouses. What isn't obligatory is the beef's garnish — a parade of carrots, poached, pureed and spherified (a molecular gastronomy technique that creates something akin to a gelatin ball) and filled with mousse. The mousse is incredibly creamy, but the encapsulating half-sphere is a touch too rubbery and relatively flavorless. The garnish feels like Nugent showing off. Unless you're Big Bunsy or have faltering vision, you never really desire that many carrot variations.

To be fair, while Nugent may be proud of his skill, I have no doubt he's a humble dude. And he mostly shows restraint in his cooking. One

contrast against the sweetness of the chocolate, Nugent boldly adorns the plate with briny chocolate-covered sea beans. If every dish were as original and fun as Nugent's desserts, Goosefoot would be a slam-dunk four-star spot. But they're not. There's a fussy occasional fascination with technique over flavor. It feels like Nugent's holding on to the idea of what fine dining is instead of pursuing what he knows it could be. If Nugent can just discover a little snark rock within, I guarantee he'll find his missing star.

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The roasted quail comes nestled in a hill of sherry- and cranberry-splashed lentils, served with compressed sour apple spheres and a cutting of slightly acidic drips of mustard oil. LAL PODORSKI/SUNTIMES PHOTOS

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