



diningout

BY MICHAEL NAGRANT email diningout@suntimes.com | Follow @michaelnagrant

The Peasantry's inventive take on chicken and waffles: A chicken and corn pancake "gyro."



ALL IN A NAME

In an upscale part of town, Peasantry's humble name signals good flavors, brings blah service

So much depends on a name. So what to think of a new restaurant in Lake View from the team behind Lincoln Park's Franks N Daws, dubbed The Peasantry?

I suppose it's a stab at communicating that there's a rustic communal thing going on here, a service of a type of food that's tasty and comforting, humble and uncomplicated. On that account The Peasantry honors its name. But, as a restaurant in a tonier part of town, it also clearly has aspirations to belie that name by offering a higher calling (why else the foie gras, frog legs or precious techniques like sous vide that are used in certain dishes?) and the simplicity. With that aim, some of the food, and most certainly the service, falls a bit short.

The room — a collection of lacquered woods and rustic communal tables topped with a smattering of utilitarian tea towel napkins backdropped by a mural of a "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea"-worthy octopus undulating near griffin-winged flying pigs — is certainly fun.

Unfortunately, the servers who work here have mistaken the tone of accessibility set by the decor to offer service that is less than professional. Though waitresses at The Peasantry are not glum gum-smacking high schoolers slumming for a buck to pay for cell phone bills or gas money, they're also not that far removed from them. A great server is empathetic, but you don't get the feel that the ones at The Peasantry care much for you. They seem as if they're watching the clock waiting for their shift to end. Cocktail orders are not delivered to everyone all at once, but whenever the bartender has poured an individual drink. If you ask for recom-

mendations, the servers feign ignorance about plates or have a tough time describing ingredients. If you order a bunch of stuff, they don't offer to course out the selection appropriately. They just bring everything at once throwing stuff down slapdash with no description.

A plate of pigs in the blanket — juicy spicy chorizo links ensnared in snarfs of buttery puff pastry nestled in a mound of tender creamy white beans larded with pancetta lardon — arrives with a poblano crema amid a group of other plates. The crema is set on the other side of the table with no suggestion that it is for dipping the pigs. We assume the crema is for slathering on a duck and coriander burger. We make that calculation because though the burger is fairly juicy, the brioche bun encapsulating it is dry, and the promised apricot and orange marmalade is really only a few wisps of orange zest that can't possibly offset the richness of the naked burger.

They might get away without a sauce here if the promised foie torchon oozed the rich funk usually bestowed by a good chunk of duck liver. However, the duck liver, if it is duck liver, is one of the most tasteless ones I've ever had. It is not a torchon, that's for sure. It is a seared lobe, not slightly molten as it should be, but almost bloodily rare and with a flavor more akin to pedestrian chicken liver.

The servers are fairly good at up-selling, telling us they'll have the cooks make buttered noodles for the kids in our party. But, they don't tell you that those noodles will cost \$13 because they're handmade. They know if they keep the secret, their check averages will be padded and you have no choice but to pay the toll.

I would, however, pay any toll for the

rabbit pasta, a linguine with a proper satisfying handmade chew encircling rich, braised, melting bites of deeply winey rabbit and thick quartered nubs of well-seared mushrooms showered with a creamy shavings of ricotta salata.

It's also pretty hard to argue with the chicken and corn pancake "gyro," an inspired riff on chicken and waffles. Then again, I could try. This is a dish you tell your friends about and want to return to eat over and over; but you also wonder, amid the otherwise well-seasoned, crispy coating, where the menu-promised sweetness of chocolate and the sting of a bit of chili have gone? What elevates things and reduces the impact of any quibble is a drizzle of maple yogurt and speeded apple slaw that rounds out the plate.

But revel in that plate too long and the servers bring you back to reality by slipping the check on the table, asking you if you want anything else, daring you to ruin their plans for a post-work cocktail, with a request for dessert.

It's understandable. While there are 24 small- to medium-sized plates nicely calibrated for sharing among a group of three or four, there is but one dessert, a deconstructed candy bar platter — an ode to Toblerone and Twix. However, if you're only gonna offer one dessert, it better be good. And in this case it is. The deconstructed Twix, a chocolate pot de creme with a caramel-laden bottom featuring a duo of salted shortbread dipping sticks is an improvement on the convenience store candy aisle staple. But as good as it is, I can't deny the fact that the shortbread's maybe a little too tough, and not nearly as buttery as the perfect crunchily shortbread once served at the now-defunct Mado.

What resurfaces things overall, however, is the affable barkeep/owner Alexander Brunacci. The Australian ex-pat has a mysterious twinkle in his eye and a roving habit. He works the tables well. If this were 1940s Morocco, it would not be hard to imagine him as "Casablanca's" Rick Blaine, donning a fedora, lighting a cigarette and making sure the folks at the cafe are well-provisioned. If Brunacci traded in a little bit of that hospitality in return for more concern about the quality of his servers, then my meals at The Peasantry certainly would have been the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Michael Nagrant is a local free-lance writer. Follow@michaelnagrant. Email the SunTimes Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.



ABOVE: Lush shavings of ricotta salata top the rabbit pasta at The Peasantry.



LEFT: This little piggy's chortle! In a riff on pigs in a blanket, links of the spicy Mexican sausage are wrapped in puff pastry.



BELOW: Twix lovers will appreciate the lone dessert — a deconstructed candy platter.