



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

UNFULFILLED

New Pump Room needs a menu worthy of its great chef

They say if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere.

Indeed, the guy who crooned that lyric, Frank Sinatra, epitomized that idea so truly that a table at the back of Chicago's new incarnation of the Pump Room located in the Public (formerly Ambassador East) Hotel honors him. Unfortunately, Chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten, the man responsible for the food on that table (the *idea* of the food anyway; Executive Chef Bradford Phillips oversees things daily), might just be the exception to that rule.

Vongerichten is to New York what Alain Ducasse is to Paris — a chef of chefs. Just as Velvet Underground albums are credited for inspiring almost every rock band of the last 40 years, Vongerichten's books and restaurants launched a thousand toques. Vongerichten led by invention. Though it is now cliché, he is generally credited (there is dispute) as the originator of the molten lava cake. At the first Vong in New York City, he didn't create fusion cooking, but his Thai/French approach was a poster child for the movement.

Unfortunately, Vongerichten attempts to crack Chicago have been a Xerox affair. His first was a fourth location of the Vong franchise on Hubbard. It lasted a couple of years before reconcepting as a mid-level noodle spot, the defunct Vong's Thai Kitchen.

But that was then. Chicago is now one of best dining cities on earth. And yet, the new Pump Room is once again a reboot; of Vongerichten's celebrated New York spot, ABC Kitchen. A plane



The housemade tagliatelle with pistachio pesto and caramelized brussels sprouts dressed in a lavish pesto sauce is an excellent menu choice at the new Pump Room.



For dessert, the salted caramel ice cream sundae served with candied peanuts, popcorn, whipped cream and chocolate sauce is a great way to go.

ticket to New York is not as cheap as it once was; a reasonable Chicago facsimile of Vongerichten might be a gift in these troubling economic times. But while many of the dishes are similar; the execution (ABC is well regarded) of

them is not.

That ingredients are organic, or seasonal, is pounded home by my server with the froth of an Occupy Wall Streeter denouncing corporate welfare. Yet the organic fried chicken breast is dry and the

accompanying hot sauce butter parches my throat like a spritz of napalm. I'd much rather spend \$19 on a Megabus ticket to Memphis and a dark meat plate at Gus's World Famous.

Unfortunately a train to Maine is more expensive. Escaping the oven-roasted lobster served slightly raw in the center is not as easy. To mask the stench of the deceased, Romans burned cinnamon on their funeral pyres. I hope the oregano sprinkle on the lobster here does the same, but it is no match for the ammoniac waft coming off the carapace.

The ceviche, a scrim of tender fluke is burnished with lemon, very little of the promised sea salt, and a timid sprinkle of horseradish that should be replaced by an assertive chile.

The fried calamari works. The pretzel dusting lends a salty caramelized note missing from traditionally battered versions. Though the squid is served with mustard aioli, and spicy marinara so traditional, you're reminded it's a very thin line between Vongerichten's genius and a well-run Olive Garden. Surely a confident iconoclast isn't indulging our chain restaurant habits?

I find inspiration in crispy toast piled with bright lemon aioli-drizzled peekytoe crab.

Housemade tagliatelle features a satisfying chew and rich and grassy caramelized Brussels sprouts that banish horrid memories of the frozen Jolly Green Giant variety. The pistachios in the pasta's pesto sauce lend a winery quality that's superior to the butteriness of traditional pine nuts.