

# eat & drink



**Travelle**  
HILARY HIGGINS/REDEYE PHOTOS

# All that glitters

## A first taste of The Langham's luxe new restaurant Travelle

By **Michael Nagrant** FOR REDEYE

Chef Tim Graham (Tru, Paris Club) was inspired by his grandmother's National Geographic collection—spanning from the 1890s to the late 1980s—to explore the culinary diversity of the Mediterranean at Travelle, a new restaurant inside new River North hotel The Langham. “I’d sit on the couch in my slippers with a beer and flip through books and magazines,”

**Travelle**  
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Take it or leave it

Graham said. “In the late ‘60s and ‘70s [National Geographic] had so much about Egypt. There were these beautiful photos that had me traveling vicariously.” I set out on my own journey to discover the execution of Graham’s inspiration, hoping Travelle would be an exotic and refreshing respite. What I found was a bit of a strange trip.

### HEY, GOOD LOOKIN’

The Langham, situated in the former IBM building designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, is a den of luxury. The common areas of the hotel are some of the most beautiful I’ve seen since the Coco Chanel-inspired environs of the Waldorf Astoria (formerly the Elysian). The first-floor lobby of The Langham features a glinting gold-bead curtain backing a giant stone bust: It’s a stoic Roman head, elongated so it looks thin and drawn like a fun-house mirror reflection—slightly disorienting but nonetheless cool. The dining room at Travelle feels like a sort of updated mid-century modern “Mad Men” aesthetic, with its freestanding semicircular banquettes perched on stainless steel spindles and Scandinavian-style dark wood and white leather dining chairs. I loved the repeating geometry of the Marina City parking garage arches offered through the western-facing windows.

### SHOOTING FOR FOUR STARS

The luxe design isn’t the only thing that signals fine-dining ambitions at Travelle. Dinner begins

with complimentary amuse bouche and ends with mignardise (tiny sweet post-dinner snacks), but unfortunately, the amuse was a flat watermelon juice lacking punch and seasoning. As expected at a high-end restaurant, servers bring new napkins if you go to the restroom and the red wine is served in elegant Riedel glasses. The servers share a lot of knowledge when you inquire about a particular wine, but those same servers also removed plates too quickly or fumbled as they set them down. And mine made promises to get answers about ingredients in certain dishes ... and never returned with those answers. Four-star ambitions, two-star execution.

### THE MENU THAT GOES ON AND ON

Chef Graham has moved away from the emulsions and fancy food stabilizers he used at Tru in favor of classic, unfussy techniques such as baking red snapper en papillote (wrapped in parchment, \$26). The fish steamed in its own juices is incredibly flaky and wafts a tempting thyme vapor when the packet is presented tableside, almost perfect, except the tiny whole peeled tomatoes served with the fish could have used a touch more salt. Graham creates silky ravioli stuffed with tender rich short rib sprinkled with slightly bitter and fruity currants and crispy pita crumbs (\$21). While there are many simply prepared and reasonably priced dishes, the menu—clocking at more than 50 items when I dined—also included \$135 seafood towers, \$300 portions of Russian golden osetra caviar and four steak dishes. I understand why: The dining room is full of pearl-wearing older ladies and suit-clad men with expensive watches. There’s clearly money to be spent. Yet when I dined, not one single table ordered those towers.



**Saganaki wings**



Cocktails at Travelle

### THE SPIRITS ARE SPENDY

The cocktails (and their prices) echo the upscale vibe. The Madhattan cocktail (Rittenhouse rye and Carpano Antica sweet vermouth) was spicy, woody, balanced and topped with a foie gras-stuffed cherry, but the foie added nothing to the drink and felt like a gimmicky attempt to justify the \$19 price tag. A cool and bracing Russian Standard vodka

martini garnished with a truffle- and caviar-stuffed olive was also a poor investment at \$22; while the few salty pearls of caviar added a nice seasoning, the rich perfume of the truffle shavings was drowned by the liquor. With master mixologists such as Paul McGee (Three Dots and a Dash) or Mike Ryan (Sable Kitchen & Bar) charging \$13 for their cocktails just a few blocks away, the drinks here felt incredibly overpriced.

### NOT-SO-TINY SMALL PLATES

Let's talk about the section of the menu preciously entitled "diminutive introductions." While that'd make a fine title for a backstage meet-and-greet with the Smurfs, it doesn't really clue you in to what you're getting, which are generous, well-portioned small plates. At many shared-plates spots, you often have to order two of everything for a group of four. At Travelle, almost all the small plates — toasted bread rounds heaped with bright, sweet mounds of crab and thick dabs of funky, briny sea urchin roe (\$18) or torpedo-shaped falafel (\$11) bursting with spicy vadouvan, a French-Indian curry spice blend with shallots and garlic — come with at least four nicely sized bites. The crispy fried saganaki chicken wings (\$13) are bathed in oregano and olive oil and splashed with fennel-infused spirits and lit on fire, Greektown-style. The servers don't yell "Opa!" but I exclaimed it in my brain anyway. Hooters could learn a thing or two from chef Graham. And yet, for every chicken wing, there's still a complex dish such as the seacutie (\$32 for three pieces, \$59 for five pieces), an assortment of seafood-based charcuterie that includes a bouillabaisse dome featuring lobster, shrimp and clams encapsulated in a gelled fish stock seasoned with saffron and Pernod. The jiggly golden dome looked like fossilized amber, but the gel had none of the anise and herbal tones of Pernod I expected to taste. A carpaccio-like purple-and-white mosaic of tender octopus looked stunning but tasted

bland, while smoky whitefish spread with tangy pink pickled onion slightly redeemed the platter.

### A SWEET STAR IS BORN

The most incredible part of my meal was a grapefruit pithivier (\$9), a puff pastry round topped with moist cake and bruleed grapefruit surrounded by candied cashews, grapefruit meringues and a dollop of honey ice cream. With the tough skin removed from the grapefruit segments, each cell burst with juice and the bitterness of the grapefruit was lifted by the sweetness of the honey: A study in contrasting textures and temperatures, this was one of the best desserts I've had in a while. Baklava (\$9) also got an update, with traditional walnuts and honey replaced by Nutella and toasted hazelnuts. Langham pastry chef Scott Green, who was the 2012 silver medalist at the World Pastry Championship in Las Vegas, is a bona fide up-and-coming star.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

Does Travelle want to cater to investment bankers or casual restaurant-seeking foodies? They need to make a choice. Right now, the service and some of the food is confusing and inconsistent. Desserts, however, are destination-worthy.

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