


diningout

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ROCKY ON RANDOLPH

Nellcote doesn't quite have solid fare footing

The housemade squid ink strozzapretti (cavatelli-like pasta twists) are tossed with "ribbons" of lobster, mint and chives, with a garlicky spring pesto sauce.



I've spent quite a few days now thinking about all the cute Rolling Stones references I could make about Nellcote, the new seasonally focused, slightly Italian-slewing, super-restaurant that recently opened in the old Marche space on Randolph. After all, the restaurant is named after the mansion Keith Richards rented in the gold coast of Southern France in 1971 while the Stones recorded the album "Exile on Main St." Hence, I thought about calling this review "Exile on Randolph." Cheap. I know. What I realized is this was really just an exercise in procrastination, a tactic to mask the fact that I have mixed feelings about this place.

I like the design. The owners allegedly spent millions of dollars on the build-out and it shows. The foyer is outfitted with floored ivory wallpaper and 400-plus mini-vases filled with French lavender, and the dining room is decked out with a Swarovski factory of glinting crystal and silky white upholstered Louis XIV-style chairs.

As swank as it is, the place is an acoustical nightmare. At only half capacity, myriad murmurs reflect against the hard concrete columns and ceilings until they become a

stadiumlike roar that drowns your ability to hold a conversation. Table placement is a little awkward, too. Communal-style tables in the center of the room are given plenty of pasture, but small tables at the edges are so close I worry about hitting the woman next to me with my rear end as I fit for dinner.

I like my server. She's enthusiastic, quick to offer an opinion and genuinely interested in our reactions to the food. However, food runners drop dishes off with no explanation, remove silverware without offering replacements for forthcoming courses, and they hover like buzzards waiting to scoop dishes from the table before they're finished.

I also like the chef. Unlike most of the cooks around town putting out dry or flavorless charcuterie illegally smoked in an improvised smoker out in the back alley of their restaurant from recipes they learned online, Nellcote's Jared Van Camp is the real deal. He was one of the first guys to be legally certified to produce charcuterie in Chicago, and ever since I tasted the winy finocchiona salami he served at his other spot, Old Town Social, I've had regular cravings for the stuff.

I now have a similar yearning for Van Camp's "Fork and Knife" pizza at Nellcote. Fork and knife is a bit of a misnomer, as that seems to conjure the gut bomb, deep dish served at Giovanni's. Puffy and blistered at the edges, crispy in the middle and slightly floppy at the tip, Nellcote's pizza is highly portable finger food, one of the best, if not the best, Neapolitan-style pizzas in Chicago. The flour for the crust is milled in-house and it manifests in a nice chew. There are lots of flavor combinations on offer, but the pie topped with meaty clusters of hand-pulled fennel sausage and woody Matsuke mushrooms is my favorite. If Nellcote installed a take-out window in back, I'd stop through every Friday night.

Van Camp clearly has a way with dough and flour. His house-made strozzapretti, dense chewy cavatelli-like pasta twists (strozzapretti means "priest choker" in Italian; one



Pizza's a good choice at Nellcote. The robust fennel sausage and hen-of-the-woods mushroom pizza is served well by the in-house milled flour used in the crust. (A. PODOGORSKI-CHICAGO SUN-TIMES PHOTOS)



Wrapped in bacon, rabbit loin is roasted to perfection.



Bright, lemon semifreddo is a delicious way to end a meal.

explanation for the name is that old gluttonous priests ate them so fast they choked themselves) chilled and tossed with soft ribbons of lobster, bracing mint, stinging chives and garlicky bits of spring pesto is a bowl of fireworks, each flavor element

bursting in rapid succession or sometimes all at once in a grand tasty finale. Rabbit loin also is perfectly roasted, juicy and nicely enrobed in crispy bacon.

And yet, the superiority of these dishes makes the failure of so many

others quite baffling. Spring ramps — tender greens wild leek shoots — are usually so powerful that folks who eat them raw are known to emit a garlic-like "hillbilly perfume" from their pores. And somehow, also stuffed with garlic, a soup made of ramps at

Nellcote is insipid and in need of a serious spritz of citrus. The scallop crudo on the bottom is bland and chewy and would better be replaced by a crispy element of some kind.

Escargot also is overcooked, mired in goops of glaucous polenta. Grilled sturgeon is flaky, but overshadowed by a spring vegetable fricassee and English peas that reek like brackish pond water.

A soft-boiled hen egg is goopy and gelatinous, unsalted and sprinkled with measly bits of croutin, and flaccid overcooked morel mushrooms.

Like the ramp soup, this dish is badly in need of a touch of acid.

For dessert, there's nothing wrong with the lemon semifreddo, a bright satisfying citrus curd spritzed with pistachio emulsion. But the *bûche au rhum* isn't quite as successful. Though Nellcote's version honors the original yeast roll origins of this famous dessert, the tough golden crust of the roll means the rum doesn't penetrate as well as it does in sponge cake-like versions. It tastes like someone poured liquor over a Parker House dinner roll. If anything at Nellcote should be associated with the Stones, it's this dessert, for it reminds me a bit of guitarist Keith Richards who, despite his hard living, has a longevity often attributed to having a body that's been embalmed with liquor.

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