

Midtown restaurant deserves attention

By Valerie Vinyard

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Hidden gems really do exist. When one's in Midtown, all the better.

Lodge on the Desert, a small resort on North Alvernon Way since 1930, always has had a restaurant on its premises.

But aside from the hotel guests, its dining room tends to be on the empty side. Many Tucsonans apparently don't think of the Lodge on the Desert when it comes to fine dining.

They should. There aren't many — if any — places in town where you can order rattlesnake, buffalo, Kobe beef and even a habanero brownie.

These creations come from Executive Chef Thayer Johnson, 34, who has been cooking for 16 years and has worked at Lodge for a year.

For the less adventurous palate, familiar standbys are on hand, such as pan-roasted chicken (\$16), agave salmon (\$19) and a New York strip (\$24).

Current construction at the resort, which will add a new lobby, pool and guest rooms, might be the reason for the sparsely populated dining room.

But this is a dining experience not to be missed.

When four of us dined on a recent Wednesday evening, we were the sole occupants in the 40-seat main dining room. Our server, Jason, was affable and knowledgeable.

The earth-tone-decorated room has comfy seating and white tablecloths, but the dining room's chandeliers were begging to be dimmed.

We started off with lobster taquitos (\$7) and Kobe beef skewers (\$12). Both of the sauces had a savory bite. Portobello mushroom bits were nestled between the Kobe beef on the four skewers. The beef was Kobe tender and went well with the garlic-chile marinade and Sambal crème fraîche. The tangy orange-jicama slaw on the side was eagerly devoured.

Two crispy eggrolls surrounded the pieces of lobster, while a smoky red mole sauce and lime crema assisted in making this appetizer a crunchy delight.

On another visit, the crispy rattlesnake (\$12) was a surprising disappointment. While the "fingers" of blue-cornmeal-crusting rattlesnake had a texture similar to calamari, the dish was about three times chewier. Papaya aioli sauce was drizzled over the dish.

One appetizer not to miss: the roasted duck quesadilla (\$6). Loaded with manchego cheese, duck confit and a dab of cilantro oil, the triangles of flour tortilla made this an almost meal-size, appetizer. Chunky mango salsa with just enough sweetness topped the dish.

If you opt for a salad, try the grilled panela cheese with Willcox beefsteak tomatoes (\$9). The panela cheese resembled mozzarella with a slightly tougher texture. The ripe gold and red tomatoes added splashes of color and complemented the mild taste of the cheese.

Entrees range from \$15 to \$34. A standout was the pan-seared buffalo ribeye (\$34). Cooked a bit over the requested medium rare, the 10-ounce organic free-range buffalo sat on a pool of sublime prickly pear nectar demi-glace.

A side of black truffle sweet potato purée had us vowing to make these sweet mashed potatoes at home. And besides looking cool, a tequila-roasted red onion retained its sweetness and crispiness.

The Kobe Beef Lodge Style (\$28) was another winner. The American-grown Kobe came out in two 4-ounce pieces. A garlic-chile marinade added smokiness. Sides of roasted fingerling potatoes and grilled asparagus made this a classy comfort meal.

Don't overlook the rather mundane-sounding 10-ounce Smokey New York strip (\$24). The smoked-chile rub made this entree anything but ordinary.

The portion of lobster ravioli (\$21), a new addition to the menu, was yummy but oh-so-small. Stuffed with bits of lobster and chevre goat cheese and topped with dabs of goat cheese, the ravioli were coated in a brown butter and Guajillo-chile sauce. Yet the five ravioli didn't justify the \$21 price.

The wild mushroom tamale with grilled vegetables (\$15) is the lone vegetarian entree, although the roasted chile rellenos (\$17) can be prepared without chicken.

In terms of presentation, the wild mushroom tamale won hands down. The dish, piled high with colorful vegetables, would give even a vehement carnivore a case of order envy. The mushroom-packed tamale sat under giant grilled vegetables, including yellow squash, zucchini, portobello mushroom and tomatoes, which added juicy bursts of flavor.

The habanero brownie (\$7) took the cake, so to speak. Infused with powdered habanero, the chocolaty brownie was topped with a scoop of vanilla ice cream to cool a tingling palate. Berries were scattered over the dessert.

It was an unforgettable ending to an enjoyable experience.

Review

Lodge on the Desert

306 N. Alvernon Way

325-3434

- Hours: Breakfast is from 7 to 10 a.m. daily; lunch is from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Mondays-Fridays; dinner is from 5 to 9 p.m. Sundays -Thursdays and until 10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.

- Family call: This is a spot for well- behaved children.

- Noise level: Quiet.

- Prices: Entrees range from \$15 to \$34.

- Reservations: Accepted.

- For more info: www.lodgeon thedesert.com.

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