

A culinary clash that works

Kultura Restaurant

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Address: 169 King St. E. (at Jarvis St.), 416-363-9000

Chef: Roger Mooking

Hours: Monday to Saturday, from 5 p.m. Sunday, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Reservations: Essential

Wheelchair access: No

Price: Dinner for two with wine, tax and tip: \$130

What do you do when you already own a trendy restaurant?

You open another, of course.

This is the course being charted by Hanif Harji, a mini-restaurant mogul who owns Blowfish and the soon-to-open Colborne Lane with cult chef Claudio Aprile. He used to be a partner in Doku 15, but no longer.

Meanwhile, Harji opened Kultura in August. Of course, he scouted a location on the design strip of King East, turning the former historic Arts on King into a three-storey hotspot.

Of course, Kultura serves tapas, that when-will-it-be-over phenomenon of sharing small dishes. Of course, these aren't traditional Spanish tapas but rather "global trans-ethnic cuisine," another label for the mishmash that occurs whenever some young chef gets a bright idea.

Of course, such slavish following of trends would be pathetic if the chef in question wasn't so darn good. Roger Mooking, 32, was the opening chef of Barrio in Leslieville, another global tapas bar. His menu for Kultura has the flavours of one country bumped up against those of another halfway around the globe, i.e., jerk chicken risotto.

A closer look, and taste, reveals instead a skilled Asian chef — Mooking is a Trinidadian native who grew up in a Chinese restaurant family — comfortable tweaking European idioms and capable of pulling off Caribbean flourishes. (In this he is like colleague Chris Straker from Eggplant across the street.)

Of course, you don't know any



DAVID COOPER/TORONTO STAR

Roger Mooking's cheeky take on fish and chips at Kultura — potato-wrapped tilapia with mushy peas.



Amy Pataki

Dining Out

of this until you get a table at Kultura, not always a simple prospect. I am repeatedly told it's difficult to accommodate me when the dining room is half-full. If these games are meant to boost Kultura's desirability, I don't want to play.

For instance: We don't have a reservation on our first visit, but the hostess says she can squeeze us in. Then the phone rings. We stand ignored in front of her as she jots down someone else's apparently quite complicated dinner booking. It's just the occasion for which the phrase "please hold" was invented.

I get a sense of this preferential phone treatment when I call in my next reservation. At first, the man answering isn't sure if he can seat me (I've heard that one before), but soon crows, "I can do it." He reads back the details, including the 7:30 p.m. time, and cheerily signs off.

When I show up, the eyes of the greeters narrow.

"Your reservation was for 7 p.m.," they say. I politely protest. "We never take bookings at 7:30 p.m.," they insist. (Not true.) Then a funny thing happens: A

table is instantly available. Am I supposed to be grateful?

Maybe this is the price exacted by beauty. Kultura sure is lovely, with its glowing fuchsia downstairs bar. The cozy upstairs dining rooms, by Commute Home, are worthy of a design magazine, what with their high ceilings, and exposed brick walls and pillar candles in the fireplaces. The crowd is magazine-worthy, too.

Like the welcome, dinner at Kultura is off to a shaky start with chilled *konnyaku* noodles (\$4), snow-white skeins of Japanese mountain yam. The problem isn't the noodles, but in the wholly unimaginative dipping sauces. Lobster ravioli in saffron bisque (\$14) tastes like neither, and the white tuna sashimi (\$12) is entirely ordinary.

Soon we get the real goods: Tiny triangles of tofu both crisp and creamy (\$8), showered in Thai vegetables. Cinnamon-flavoured chicken samosas (\$11) in crunchy spring roll wrappers.

A stack of miniature chicken schnitzels (\$11) is partnered with chipotle sauce, like chicken nuggets for kids who grew up gourmet. Caribbean shrimp (\$13) sit atop mashed banana sambal, the fruitiness infinitely seductive.

Things kick into even higher gear with "fish & chips" (\$12). Of course, it's ironic. Tilapia is wrapped in the thinnest Yukon Gold potato slices; the two elements are deep-fried together. There's an empty paper cone on the plate to underscore the well-executed joke, but the punch line lies in the ramekin of homemade tartar sauce. Why? Two words: Truffle oil. It really, really works.

The Chinese pyjama-clad server, too, starts to show his stuff. Initially, he gives the spiel — "Order three or four dishes per person, everything comes in random order, it's placed in the middle of the table to share" — with a supercilious air. When we accept his recommendation of an Alkoomi Shiraz/Viognier — available in a 250-millilitre carafe, it is one of many interesting choices on sommelier Kim Cyr's list — he warms up enough to pour an extra glass gratis.

A host of other servers bring out the stunning modern plates and explain how to eat them. Overtenderized tandoori beef (\$12), we are told, must first be dipped in tamarind sauce and then coconut. It flirts with preciousness. That's when we get what we ordered. One night, the runners bring out two dishes nobody asked for while the fish & chips arrive cold, after a two-hour wait.

What doesn't work is the jerk chicken risotto. Not because of the mildly seasoned chicken, but because the risotto is doctored with shredded coconut. It comes across like under-sweetened rice pudding.

A far better use of Mooking's time is production of sugar-dusted donut holes (\$7) light enough to melt in the mouth;

WORD OF MOUTH

Quince season

The stork has delivered a bouncing baby restaurant. Former Stork on the Roof owners Jennifer Gittins and Michael van den Winkel have opened Quince at 2110 Yonge St. with a Mediterranean menu.

First came Sopra, then came Opal. Opal, at 472 Queen St. W., is recast as our newest jazz lounge, with a menu by Fawzi Kotb (ex-Peppino's on the Beach). Jazz nightly at 8.

Trevor Wilkinson used to cook at Lobby. Now, he's got his name on the door of Trevor Kitchen & Bar, 38 Wellington St. E. (formerly Bouchon). The mini kobe burgers are still on offer.

Besides its location five floors above the nightclub Easy, I think I know another reason why it's called The Fifth Grill. This is the fifth time in the last five years that the fine-dining room at 225 Richmond St. W. has changed executive chefs. The latest incumbent, J.P. Chalet (ex-Le Sélect Bistrot), previously held the post two years ago.

Marc Thuet, another alumnus of the The Fifth, went on to better things at his eponymous bistro and bakery at 609 King St. W. Bigger, too: Thuet is expanding into Liberty Village later this year with a prepared foods shop.

AMY PATAKI

the accompanying dipping sauces are good, if pointless.

Nicely done apple crumble (\$8) has real crunch in the topping, but a white chocolate cake (\$8) has the texture of Styrofoam. "Cheesecakes" are Mooking's version of the cheese course (\$12), three cheeses whipped into mousse. But at Kultura, a fusion tapas place that actually works — mostly — such witty variations are par for the course. Of course.

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- ★★★★★ Outstanding
- ★★★★☆ Excellent
- ★★★★ Very good
- ★★★ Good
- ★★ Fair
- ★ Poor
- ★ Awful