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Oh Yeah

OYA Combines Basic Elements for Unique, Chic Culinary Experience
by Rachel Hunt and Stephen Qualiana

Hyped by its promoters as cool a la L.A., one may be more struck by OYA's elemental quality than its trendiness upon entering the restaurant.

The subtle interplay of the four elements—earth, air, fire and water—in OYA's striking design (overseen by owner and D.C. native Errol Lawrence) is reflected in the juxtaposition of a water wall separating the kitchen from the dining room and a long, clean gas-burning fireplace framed by white candles running along another wall.

A ceiling-to-floor cascade of ice-like capiz shells absorbs the flickering firelight. High ceilings and unusually vast spaces between the tables, (particularly for a downtown restaurant) impart an airy quality. Earth tones in the darkly stained walnut floors and the ochre-toned bar contrast with the stark white leather seating and white marble walls. Metal chain, a dominant decorative motif throughout the space, enhances the stark contrasts and fades as a discrete element against the palate of the interior.

What Lawrence had done in designing OYA, executive chef Kingsley John has done with his menu, but the elements he works with are the four taste sensations—bitter, sweet, sour and salty. In developing his menu, John has created striking and unusual taste and texture combinations that balance the four tastes.

Borrowing from cuisines around the globe that he encountered growing up in his native St. Lucia and in the trans-continental culinary adventure of his training, chef John pairs ingredients and techniques to create sometimes recognizable and sometimes totally unique dishes.

One of John's signatures, the Oiroll (\$12), is based on a California roll but incorporates curried chicken and is served with coconut vinaigrette. The pork mushroom tempura (\$11) begins with a mushroom cap that was stuffed with a ground pork mixture, dipped in tempura batter, fried, and served with a salty-sweet mango soy sauce. The dish is good when served very hot, but does not do as well if allowed to cool when it tends to get limp and seems greasier.

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The pan-seared scallops (\$18) are one of the simpler dishes on the menu. Three large scallops are lightly pan sautéed and served with a delicious cauliflower puree and vegetable escovitch. Although delicious, the price seemed a bit high. A heartier dish, the braised short ribs served with vanilla apple puree and tostones, is good, but the puree seemed almost too delicate for the beef and plantains.

Crispy whole fish (\$29) served in a rich dill broth with pickled baby vegetables, a signature dish at OYA, was unlike any other we have seen. The fish was filleted, the spine deep fried to form a rigid basket, then the fillets were pan fried and served in the basket. The presentation was dramatic, and the fish (which varies seasonally) was delicious.

Less unusual in presentation only was the blackened salmon (\$27). Not typical blackening, the blend contained ground almonds and spices for a richer, sweeter taste and a grainier texture. The almost obligatory starch accompaniment was lightly coarse white corn grits. Sautéed spinach and a touch of port reduction rounded out the dish.

Another signature dish, the pimento-crusted duck (\$30), was a complicated dish of spice-rubbed, pan-seared breast served with wild mushrooms, taro, Swiss chard and a fois gras black pepper sauce. The dish covered every taste element and then some.

Unlike many of its competitors, OYA is not offering its vegetable dishes as sides on the menu, but the staff was obliging and can arrange to bring you a sampling of the Yukon truffle potatoes, which, if they don't come with a dish, are worth asking for.

Desserts at OYA, under the direction of pastry chef Jean-Rony Fougere, were eclectic in keeping with the rest of the menu. Two choices in particular stand out: The banana bread pudding (\$10) is made of croissant and served with caramelized baby bananas and rum raisin ice cream. The croissant made an already rich dish richer, and gave the pudding itself a more chewy texture that was balanced by the meltingly smooth ice cream. Even those who think bread pudding is sick people's food will have to change their minds after this one.

A striking presentation, the baby pineapple baked Alaska (\$10) demonstrates that Fougere shares with his associates a love for mixing culinary metaphors. He takes a traditional baked Alaska, stuffs it into a whole baby pineapple, bakes the meringue on top, and douses it with pineapple compote and pineapple-infused rum. The chocolate bombe (\$10) was the only disappointment of the evening. Small, dry and rather flat, it could not compete with its menu mates.

OYA staff were engagingly casual, from their bright orange T-shirts and black jeans to their culinary enthusiasms. All were clearly working very hard to make the customers happy, from the dining room manager who checks regularly to see if you are enjoying the meal to the busboy who discusses his favorite dish with you. Against the stark elegance of the interior, the service style was all beachside café, once again underscoring Lawrence's use of contrast to achieve effect. Occasionally, this casual attitude extended to timing the arrival of the food, which was unfortunate in that it can prevent diners from the fullest enjoyment of each creation.

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OYA's drink menu deserves special mention. Like the rest of the menu, it reflects OYA's creative and sometimes playful translation of the traditional into new and often more interesting versions. As the first thing on the menu, the long list of rum infusions and specialty martinis made choosing difficult. The cilantro daiquiri (\$15) and guava mojito (\$15) were two excellent choices, but there are many others. So extensive and so interesting are the specialty drinks that one could easily get hung up on those pages alone. Either \$13 or \$15 each; however, it's a pricy foray. The wine selection is reasonably well balanced, and at this point OYA is not offering any beer.

OYA was striking in a number of ways. Its cuisine was eclectic, interesting, and mostly well prepared; its staff very agreeable; and its interior was dramatic. And OYA is expensive. The restaurant faces the interesting challenge of successfully balancing the slightly discordant elements of haute interior, high prices, casual service and unusual menu.

OYA Restaurant & Lounge is located at 777 9th St., NW. The telephone number is (202) 393-1400. Lunch is served Monday to Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Dinner is served daily from 5:30 to 10:30 p.m. and a daily late night menu from 11 p.m. to 1 a.m. Dress is urban elegant to business.

Rachel Hunt and Stephen Qualiana are the restaurant reviewers for the Washington Diplomat.