



ALEXANDRA GILL

Diva at the Met: A gastronomic extravaganza

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Comments

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Diva at the Met

645 Howe St., Vancouver

604-602-7788

metropolitan.com/diva

\$330 for two seven-course tasting menus with wine pairings, tax and tip

Cuisine: Modern West Coast

The new seven-course tasting menu at Diva at the Met isn't just a meal. It's a gastronomic extravaganza for celebrating special occasions, spoiling that certain someone – and seducing traditionalists to the charms of modernist cuisine.

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Culinary technophobes may not initially be impressed by the kitchen's opening explosion of powdered, gelled and puffed *amuse-bouches*. And they'll probably find it ironic that all these molecularly contrived micro-bites are presented on rough-hewn tree slabs, scavenged beach rocks and other natural materials.

But even die-hard detractors, no matter how much they scorn wafer-thin bacon chips squeezed from dehydrated pork belly, will have to concede that there is nothing artificial about its voluptuously smoky, maple-glazed flavour.

The naysayers might be pleasantly surprised to see that Parmesan cheese – albeit a puffed Parmesan cracker buried under Parmesan powder – hasn't been stuffed into a kumquat to make it taste like fennel or other wonky hocus-pocus. On the contrary, these contrasting cheese textures are combined rather conventionally, though no less magically, with a charred eggplant, black olive and red pepper purée that electrifies its inherent nuttiness. Some might even grudgingly agree that aerated brioche, though it looks awfully gimmicky, actually makes a perfect, lightly crunchy pedestal for creamy Canadian caviar.

If they still aren't swayed, who cares? You'll be having too much fun eating olive-oil marshmallows sprinkled with a shake of Kalamata salt and wondering how the chef captured the earthy essence of Kennebec potatoes in clear, crackly "glass" sheets showered with shaved Périgord truffle.

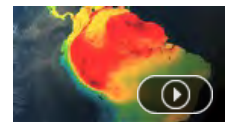
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And that's just the prelude. There are still seven larger courses to devour.

Good things do sometimes come to those with stamina. This is the fourth time in six years that I've reviewed Diva at the Met and its revolving door of executive chefs. Each new regime has improved upon the last, but the changes have never been this dramatic. Let's hope, for the sake of the Metropolitan Hotel and ours, that Hamid Salimian is a keeper.

Born in Iran, trained in Vancouver and honed on the competitive edge of four World Culinary Olympics, Mr. Salimian is an exciting local anomaly: cosmopolitan, daring and unapologetically modern, yet firmly grounded in classic French techniques and inspired by his Persian heritage. As the former executive chef of Richmond's Westin Wall Centre, he had freedom to play with liquid nitrogen, hydrocolloids, meat glues and assorted techno toys – and time to outgrow their more frivolous novelties. Last fall, after returning to Diva – where he started straight out of his apprenticeship 10 years ago – he brought the best of all worlds full circle.

Sure, the showy cavalcade of six *amuse-bouches* – three when ordering à la carte – is fantastically over the top. But dig deeper into the degustation menu (also offered in five courses for \$55 a person, \$90 with wine pairings) and you'll discover that Mr. Salimian primarily uses his geeky gadgets and chemical compounds to enrich familiar dishes.

Take, for example, his transcendent sweetbreads. There are no evanescent foams, liquid spheres or obvious flashes of scientific trickery on this plate. But an unbreaded veal thymus could never become this smoothly plump and crisply crusted through traditional preparations. Mr. Salimian brines his lobes overnight in a vacuum-sealed milk pouch and slowly coddles them under water, which infuses the lean offal with incredible creaminess and makes it easier to separate into cleanly shaped, uniformly sized portions that cook evenly throughout. (The roasted crackle effect is achieved by braising the sweetbreads in caramelized onions before and after searing.) Mr. Salimian uses a similar low, slow *sous-vide* technique to intensify the buttery lusciousness of tiny Tokyo turnips (served with meltingly tender short rib and leek-ash-crusting tenderloin), and boost the pure vegetal sweetness of a velvety celeriac potage (poured tableside over the plush yolk of a 45-minute-cooked egg, deep-fried celeriac "hay" and slivered truffle).

The dishes aren't all familiar. And flavour is does occasionally fall victim to experimental deconstructions. Puffed foie gras takes the unset makings of creamy duck-liver torchon and suctions it through an industrial vacuum to create a porous toffee-like sponge that melts in the mouth like butter. But for all its wondrous texture, the foie's rich, fatty flavour is diluted through the process.

And this is where Mr. Salimian's maturity as a chef comes into focus.

Instead of resting on the foie's wow factor, or spinning his creation ever further into the future with spherified port bubbles (as he used to present it at the Westin Wall Centre), he anchors the fluffy puff in a deeply caramelized pool of sticky fig molasses studded with candied walnuts and pickled green strawberries. Thus, he boldly compensates for the foie's weakened flavour, incorporates the molecular aspect into a coherently balanced package and stamps it with Persian personality.

The bright, juicy flavours of traditional Middle Eastern cuisine are blended with modern twists in several dishes. Terrifically tender duck breast jolts to attention with sour pomegranate, crackly orange segment, kale crisps and puffed quinoa. Salt-charred ling cod is lifted to new heights in a burnt-eggplant-and-tomato fondue that is just as impressive by virtue of flavour than any newfangled technique.

There are few chefs in Vancouver committed to modernist cuisine. And there are certainly no other molecular-minded Persian chefs in the city. Hamid Salimian is one of a kind and his cuisine is thrilling. The naysayers will be captivated.

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