

Another Wit winner: dramatic Cibo Matto

By Alison Neumer Lara

Nov. 02, 2009

The Wit did it again. I'm not sure how many more times we can applaud this hot new hotel for its restaurants, home to the cocktail lounge Roof and the gastropub-y State and Lake, but it's not unwarranted. Cibo Matto, the second floor's modern Italian outpost that opened for dinner in July, is now also a destination lunch spot for business entertaining.

The dramatic, 120-seat dining room lives up to the restaurant's name (Cibo Matto translates to "crazy food"). Two rows of white, high-backed settees lined up like booths dominate the center of the space underneath a 40-foot-long ceiling fresco of overlapping photographs by artist Todd Murphy. Guests enter from street level by way of a glass-and-steel staircase next to a 2,000-bottle wine tower.

Chef Todd Stein, former chef-de-cuisine at MK, features a well-edited menu of lunch options — a little more than a dozen total — including starters, entrée salads, sandwiches and pasta. The only traditional main course is one of the restaurant's signature dishes: roasted local whitefish (\$20) with peperonata (a pepper and tomato relish), parsley oil and aged balsamic vinegar.

Among the appetizers, we'd quickly return to the antipasto plate (\$10). It stars two robustly flavored, well-marbled salami and transparent slices of coppa, another cured meat, garnished with thin wedges of Pleasant Ridge Reserve (aged cow's milk cheese) and a small (we wish it were bigger) pile of pickled turnips and red onions. The salumi portion is plenty to share.

Fresh mozzarella salad (\$10) is a welcome departure from the standard, something for which Mr. Stein has a flair. Here he updates a familiar dish for fall with slices of apple and red onion, watercress and a sprinkling of toasted hazelnuts. The cheese itself, a cow's milk variety, is lighter than most.

CIBO MATTO

The Wit Hotel

201 N. State St. | (312) 239-9500

www.cibomatto.therestaurantsatthewit.com

Entrée salads are thoughtfully composed and balanced. Ribbons of Belgian endive and radicchio are tossed with lemony vinaigrette and garnished with (not overwhelmed by) shredded chicken, chunks of Gorgonzola and toasted pine nuts (\$14). A pile of curly frisée and mixed greens is studded with crispy cubes of pancetta and fluffy dollops of scrambled egg — think salad Lyonnaise gone very, very right (\$14).

We scratched the burger itch with a ground lamb version on squares of soft, eggy bread (\$16). Tasty, but if the dish is meant to have a Greek/Mediterranean swagger, it needed a little more aggressive seasoning — mint came through, but barely, and the yogurt lacked tang.

Ordering pasta here, however, is a sure thing. Carbonara-style bucatini (\$16), long noodle tubes, arrives with an egg yolk sitting on top. Mix it in, and along with the pancetta and shower of fresh parsley, the lightweight but rich-tasting sauce turns velvety. A generous amount of fresh pepper sets off the dish.

Pastry chef Tina Blanco handles desserts. Only two are offered at lunch, but the choice is obvious (OK, to me): her sophisticated chocolate-hazelnut crunch bar (\$9). It's an adult candy bar meets mousse with . . . wait for it . . . banana caramel and a sheet of hazelnut brittle. If I sound delighted, well, you got me. Even our servers (all of

whom were friendly and professional) seemed rapturous when describing it.

©2009 by Crain Communications Inc.
