Wine-loving novelist dines out in Chicago

27 Apr 2012 by Jay McInerney

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Charlie Trotter put Chicago on the fine-dining map way back in 1987, and the news that he was closing his restaurant after 25 years drew me back to re-live the magic and to check out the new restaurants that have come in his wake, including Grant Achatz' elBulli-inspired **Alinea**, which is currently [well, was until last Monday night's announcement of this year's rankings - JR] ranked seventh in the world by *Restaurant* magazine, as well as his newest venture, **Next**. I preferred the latter, with its warmer and less formal presentation, and its whacky menu based on the theme of childhood, complete with deconstructed chicken noodle soup, mac and cheese burger, and cider donuts. (Since then the theme has changed to elBulli, a natural for Achatz, who spent a *stage* in the kitchen of Ferran Adrià's late, lamented restaurant.)

A long weekend turns out not to be enough time to experience the new high-end dining scene in Chicago and last weekend I went back to try the newest of Chicago's temples of haute cuisine **Ria**, the creation of 29-year-old chef Danny Grant, who got two Michelin stars right off the bat and was just named one of *Food & Wine's* best new chefs. It's a very young team at Ria; sommelier Dan Pilkey, a San Diego native who manages to seem like a surfer even in a suit and tie, is just 30. Ria seems very grown up though, occupying as it does a very grand space in the Waldorf Astoria, and Grant's food is serious, more classical than that of Achatz, with fewer flourishes. After Alinea and Next, the dishes seem minimalist, with an almost Japanese precision and delicacy of presentation.

A scallop caviar and octopus combination was one of the best starters of recent memory. I was also impressed by a perfect lozenge of dover sole with hedgehog mushrooms and calvados, which Dan paired with a suitably rich 2006 Jean-Philippe Fichet, Tesson 2006 Meursault. The most perfect pairing came with the next course, pasta with Périgord black truffle and celeriac which we washed down with an earthy, truffley Leroy 1980 Musigny, one of several rare treasures on the list, which ranges around the world. (Of course, if the pairing hadn't been perfect I would have just skipped the food.)

The Peking duck with orange and savoy cabbage was a perfect piece of pink, tender, smoky breast wearing a shiny hat of crisp duck skin which was a worthy foil for the robust and ready Dujac 2002 Bonnes Mares, a wine that I promptly put on my wish list. The climax of the meal was a surf and turf combo of Australian wagyu beef and poached lobster with black truffle, which Pilkey matched with a very plush and luscious Clos L'Église 2000 Pomerol. The artisan cheese plate was an all-American affair, for which the Klein Constantia, Vin de Constance Muscat de Frontignan, a sweet wine with snap, was very versatile, proving robust enough even for the Cave Man Blue from Rogue Creamery in Oregon. The women at the table raved about the desserts by pastry chef Aya Fukai but I stopped at the cheese, preferring my sugar, as usual, in liquid form.

Ria is definitely worth a detour - certainly worth a trip to Chicago from New York. I still think New York retains the title of top food destination in the US, but I'm already planning my next trip to the Windy City, which lived up to its name the day I flew in to O'Hare. I'd like to get at least one more meal in at **Charlie Trotter's**, preferably after the legendary sommelier Larry Stone returns for a swan song to work the cellar he made into one of the best in America. Stone invested heavily in Jayer and Domaine Leroy in the early days, going extremely long on the 1990 Leroys, and many of those bottles are still in the cellar. The auction houses are all drooling over the prospect of selling Charlie's stash, but he claims he's going to drink it himself.

Sounds to me like a comeback is not out of the question.