

Capital style in DC

14 Jun 2013 by Nick Lander/FT

José Andrés at Jaleo (pictured), Jamie Leeds at Hank's Oyster Bar and Eric Ziebold at CityZen in the Mandarin Oriental hotel are three chefs in Washington DC united not just by their obvious culinary talent but also by a good sense of humour.

While the capital's politicians seem devoid of this crucial human trait, with visits to the Capitol cancelled and so many entrances closed that it takes my political acquaintance there far longer to get to his desk, these chefs appreciate how easy it can be to bring a smile to their customers' faces.

I began to smile as we walked past the tables in CityZen, where we were to meet three friends whose former careers as a fighter pilot, a helicopter pilot and a Marine have now led to the more peaceful pleasures of enjoying good food and wine. At the centre of each table we walked past was a wooden box filled with what looked to me like a small challah, the Jewish plaited loaf.

Our table was right by the open kitchen at the corner of which Ziebold stands as an unflinching guard with nothing, or nobody, able to escape his gaze. This location allowed me to talk to him at the end of a most impressive first course.

This consisted of a shallow bowl of pommes mousseline, extremely indulgent mashed potatoes, topped with slices of Maine sea urchin, both enhanced by an emulsion of Meyer lemons. It was not just delicious, the tang of the sea urchin offset by the creamy potato, but also a clever reworking of a combination that reveals the innate confidence of a top chef, in juxtaposing an extremely inexpensive ingredient with another many times more costly. Pasta with truffles is another such harmonious duo.

Ziebold explained that these small loaves were Parker House rolls named after the hotel in Boston where they were first served in the 1860s. The box that they snugly fit within was inspired by a second-hand, leather Italian cigar box he once saw for sale in an antique shop in Georgetown.

As he took me through the few steps it takes to make these rolls (and honey is the only slightly unlikely ingredient), Ziebold explained their role. 'Serving these allows me to present every guest with something we've baked specially for them, as they only take six minutes in the oven.'

Over at Jaleo, it was both the first thing I saw as I walked in and the last two dishes I ate that made me smile.

In fact, I was so taken by the two new table-football games to which a glass top has been added so that customers can sit round them (Andrés is an ardent Barcelona FC fan) that I failed to follow the receptionist to our designated table. But I quickly made up for lost time.

Liquid olives as created by Ferran Adrià; cones of salmon tartare and trout roe; plates of Iberico ham and thin crisp bread, par-baked in Spain, finished in DC and then spread with butter and sea urchin, were impressive. But they were really curtain raisers for our last two dishes.

These were chicken croquetas, made to Andrés's grandmother's recipe and fried as cleanly as I am sure she should have liked, but here served, to meet her grandson's whim, wrapped in wax paper, within a resin shoe designed by Mexican Sami Hayek. Then comes a Spanish interpretation of the all-American burger: the meat is ground skirt steak from an Iberico pig; piquillo peppers replace the slices of tomato; and aioli is the pungent binder, not mayonnaise.

But Jaleo's biggest contribution to the life of the capital lies not exclusively in the authentic Spanish food It has served since it opened twenty years ago but also in the invaluable role it has played in DC's urban regeneration. When Andrés's partner, Rob Wilder, took a gamble on this corner site in 1993 the area was a series of abandoned blocks with only minimal activity at night. Today, the shops, theatres, offices and hotels thrive in what has now become known as Penn Quarter.



If Jaleo appeals with the food of the Old World, then Hank's Oyster Bar resonates with dishes that evoke the East Coast. The branch we went to is only a ten-minute walk from the Capitol but culinarily light years away from its canteen, where the food my informant described to me is, in his opinion, no better than that of a 'bad college dorm'.

A blackboard broadcasts that day's oyster offering - Sun Hollow, Goose Point, Quilcene, Wild Oyster and Belon - the different flavours of which our waiter described in detail while sporting a T shirt that boasts an oyster and the slogan 'Get out of your shell'. His enthusiasm for bivalves extended to a series of questions to me about which oysters are currently at their best in the UK.

Generously stuffed lobster rolls followed, an all-time favourite when on the East Coast, then the unexpected. On top of the ubiquitous black folder containing my bill for US\$100 for three comes a small glass bowl of eight pieces of dark chocolate. A simple and considerate gesture, guaranteed to bring a smile to the face of any customer.

CityZen, Mandarin Oriental 1330 Maryland Avenue; tel +1 202 787 6006 http://www.mandarinoriental.com/washington/fine-dining/city-zen/

Hank's Oyster Bar (several branches) www.hanksoysterbar.com

Jaleo 480 7th Street NW, Washington DC; tel +1 202 628 7949 www.jaleo.com