



FOOD DRINK REVIEW

BY BRAD A. JOHNSON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY VIVICA MENEGAZ



FROM LEFT: Play it safe, and get the steak; the bar heats up and requires a velvet rope to keep the singles in line

WILSHIRE *Riddle: What do you get when you cross a velvet rope with an organic gardener?*

"Isn't that soup amazing?" my waiter asked, not caring that he was interrupting a really good story, because, clearly, what he had to say was far more important. "And can you believe it's vegan, except for the cream?"

I looked at my friend Jean and tried my best not to laugh, but ended up snorting a few drops of almost-vegan soup through my nose. It was a beautiful pumpkin color, so tinted from red kuri squash, and vaguely fragrant of Asian pears, which were also in the purée, along with a swirl of cinnamon cream. If the soup had in fact been vegan, I would not have been any more impressed.

I'm conflicted about Wilshire. I really want to love this place. But it's not clear to me that the restaurant knows what it wants to be, or who its intended audience should be. On the one hand, the culinary concept is impressive: Support the environment by buying organics, help small farms, preserve heirloom foods, serve great cuisine. But the food is, for the most part, poorly executed. And I do like the décor, a beautiful urban forest created by Thomas Schoos, the whiz who dreamed up the stunning looks of Koi and O-Bar. But Larry, Curly and Moe, it seems, have all found jobs as waiters at Wilshire, and it appears that Lucy and Ethel are in the kitchen, while Mommie Dearest answers the phones. It's a slapstick combo that makes for a great situation comedy, but for a serious fine-dining restaurant... not so good.

I was at home when the phone rang. "Hello?"

"I'm calling from Wilshire restaurant about a reservation you requested. The time you wanted, 7:30, is out of the question, but we can do 6 or 10. Do you want either of those?"

Wow. Whatever happened to "Hello, how are you?" She offered no salutation, no warm greeting, no "thanks for thinking of Wilshire," no "we would love to accommodate you as requested, but we're simply full at that time," or anything remotely polite like that. The woman was clearly annoyed that she had to call me back in the first place. She seemed even further put off by the fact that I could be so stupid to believe I could get a table at 7:30PM with only four days' notice.

I wasn't sure what to say. My first instinct was to hang up and never call again. But I took a deep breath and tried to convince myself that this poor, cranky woman was merely having a terrible day and it was my job to cheer her up.

"How about 7:15?" I ventured, laughing, so she'd know it was a joke.

"No," she barked, not amused.

I bit my tongue. "Nothing at 8 o'clock?" I asked, knowing I was pushing my luck.

"Well, I could squeeze you in at 8:45."

CONTINUED...

"I'll take it," I said, and then she mumbled a curt "thank you" and hung up. "Can't wait," I thought.

On my second attempt at making a reservation, I got the answering machine again, and once more had to wait until the next day for someone to call me back and tell me whether I'd been accepted or rejected. I felt so D-list, but I guess that's the point of restaurants that operate this way. A velvet rope and large bouncer guard the entrance most nights. The phone rang, and it was a different caller this time, who was only marginally sweeter than the first, but my table was confirmed at almost the time I wanted. Funny, for my third reservation, I logged onto www.opentable.com, and got the exact time and date I wanted right away.

But back to that soup. It was gritty. The pear wasn't puréed very well. I'm sure it began as a wonderful organic pear, but the cook forgot to taste it. And it wasn't just the soup. Short ribs looked amazing, but the cook forgot to add salt to either the meat or the potatoes. My pan-roasted partridge was beautiful and tender, served with its head splayed down the middle, but the accompanying "brioche stuffing" was merely a dry stir-fry of croutons and giblets. "Crispy sweetbreads" were not even the slightest bit crispy (but they were partially raw). A poached-egg appetizer was overcooked to the point of being a boiled egg. Tuna carpaccio was sinewy. Chocolate crêpes were burnt. Unfortunately, almost everything I ate here over the course of three visits seemed like a noble idea but fell victim to poor execution, which makes me wonder if maybe the kind of cooking chef Christopher Blobaum is attempting—the same rustic, farm-fresh approach that Govind Armstrong champions at Table 8—doesn't require the smaller forum. The kitchen seems forever exasperated, unable to keep pace with the number of orders that stream in from two packed dining rooms, two large patios and a private clubhouse, not to mention the food being served at both bars on either end of the compound. The score: I found only two dishes that I can truly say I enjoyed: a lean, very beefy sirloin steak and a succulent duck confit salad.

Throw bad service into the mix, and it spells disaster. One night, after having waited 30 minutes for someone to return and take our order, our food finally arrived. A waitress set a plate in front of me with something resembling salmon. Before she sped away, I asked, "Wait, what is this?" To which she quickly replied, "Salmon."

after that, the silverware arrived. The snapper was possibly the saltiest fish I've ever eaten (clearly, not from the same cook who made the short ribs). At about that time, a waiter knocked over a wine glass at the next table (the second one to crash within the hour), sending the bottom half of the glass shooting across the dining room like a hockey puck reacting to Wayne Gretzky's stick. Three women in the puck's path ducked and squealed.

Then, as if on cue, a woman resembling the plastic-surgery "cat woman" we've all seen on TV, dressed in a black leather miniskirt that left *way* too little to the imagination, her hair looking like she'd stuck her finger in a light socket, stumbled into the dining room and, apparently drunk, fell onto a table of stunned Brentwood socialites before wandering back toward the patio. A few moments later, we watched as one of the managers escorted her out the front door. Then some guy strolled in wearing a top hat (I'm not making this up). He posed in the middle of the room for a minute, just stood there (I assume, so we could look at him), then went back to the bar to finish his drink.

There are clearly two very distinct clienteles here, and that's another big problem. At some tables, there are the highbrow folks who shop at the farmers' markets and appreciate what Blobaum is attempting to do. Most of the others are people who use "party" as a verb and are here to do it—and they're the ones you'll have to stand behind in line to the bathroom (and, yes, there's always a line!).

I sincerely wish Wilshire were able to concentrate on the food, because the potential is so obviously there. But for now—and unless there's a drastic change—this place is really just about the scene. **A**

WILSHIRE: 2454 WILSHIRE BLVD., SANTA MONICA, 310.586.1707 **HOURS:** LUNCH MON.–FRI., 11:30AM–2PM; DINNER MON.–SAT., 6–10PM, SUN., 6–9PM; BAR MENU FROM 5PM DAILY **WHO'S THERE:** CAT WOMAN, TOP-HAT GUY, BRENTWOOD SOCIALITES, FARMERS' MARKET FOODIES, THE GENUINELY HIP AS WELL AS PEOPLE WHO ARRIVE IN WHITE STRETCH LIMOS **WHERE TO SIT:** THE PATIO **ABOUT THE NOISE:** THE BAR IS DEAFENING, THE DINING ROOMS ARE LOUD BUT TOLERABLE, AND THE PATIO IS ABSOLUTELY LOVELY **WHAT IT COSTS:** APPETIZERS, \$9–22; ENTRÉES, \$24–38; DESSERT, \$7–8; VALET PARKING, \$4.50 **RATING** (ON A 5-STAR SCALE): ★

What the stars mean: 1 = fair, some noteworthy qualities; 2 = good, above average; 3 = very good, well above norm; 4 = excellent, among the area's best; 5 = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service.

I HAD TO WAIT UNTIL THE NEXT DAY FOR SOMEONE TO CALL ME BACK AND TELL ME WHETHER MY RESERVATION HAD BEEN ACCEPTED OR REJECTED. I FELT SO D-LIST, BUT I GUESS THAT'S THE POINT

"That's what I thought," I said. "But I ordered the snapper."

"Oh, sorry, my bad," she said, "that actually is the snapper."

"This is snapper? Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yes, yes, that's the snapper, I swear. I just got confused."

And with that, she was off, so I flagged down the waiter who took my order and asked him what it was. He confirmed my suspicion. It was the salmon. He promptly took it away and promised to return shortly with the right dish. Meanwhile, I realized that our other entrée, a tenderloin of wild boar, had arrived without its promised cranberry compote. I flagged down another waiter. A manager came to apologize, then went to the kitchen to find it. Five minutes later, another manager, apparently oblivious to our perils, strolled by and casually asked, "Is everything wonderful tonight?"

Two gigantic mounds of compote eventually arrived—each the size of a chicken egg, weighing nearly as much as the boar itself. Did I just receive the kitchen's entire stash? It was 30 minutes later when the snapper arrived. Two or three minutes



Chef Christopher Blobaum