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Dining Out

Taster's choice

Rosemary's affordable tasting menu is foodie extravagance

by AL MANCINI

SIMPLICITY HAS ITS

ADVANTAGES, but there comes a time when you have to say, "Enough already!" And after dedicating the past three weeks to reviewing simple, basic cuisine like sushi, Mexican food and subs, I finally needed to do something decadent and extravagant. And for foodies, only one thing fits that bill: a tasting menu.

In French dining, its known as a "degustation" menu, while the Japanese refer to it as "omakase." But whatever you call it, nothing in the dining world compares to putting yourself in the hands of the chef, enjoying multiple courses of whatever he or she believes are the restaurant's finest dishes.

Generally, a tasting menu is a pricey proposition. Some of our city's finer restaurants charge upward of \$250 or even \$300 per person for the treat of 10 or more courses, while five-course meals routinely break triple digits. But if you hit Rosemary's restaurant on West Sahara Avenue, you can get a delicious five-course meal for \$70 a head. Sure, it's not cheap. But it's well worth the occasional splurge.

For those unfamiliar with Rosemary's, it's one of this city's better off-Strip restaurants, open for lunch on weekdays and dinner seven days a week. Chefs Michael and Wendy Jordan offer the tasting menu, a three-course prix fixe meal (\$50) or a la carte dishes (appetizers \$12-\$21; entrees \$25-\$40) in the main dining room, and small snacks in the lounge. They describe the cuisine as "American fare," but don't let the term fool you into thinking the food here is ordinary or simple. Entrees include apple bacon crusted salmon and

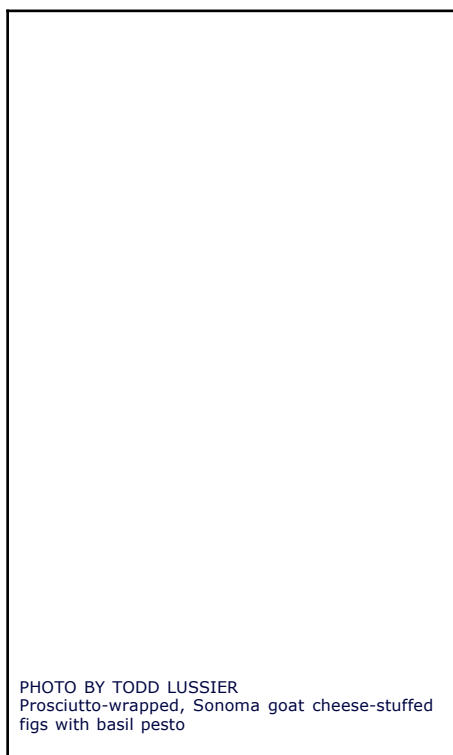


PHOTO BY TODD LUSSIER
Prosciutto-wrapped, Sonoma goat cheese-stuffed figs with basil pesto

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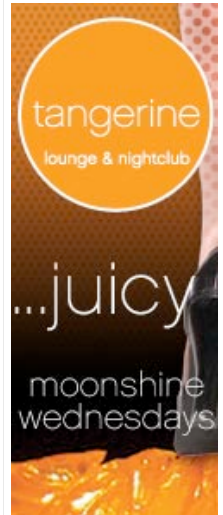
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yellowfin tuna au poivre, and this is one of the few off-Strip places where you'll find appetizers like pan-fried, milk-fed veal sweetbreads.

But I didn't waste a lot of time looking at the menu. Hungry and lazy, I simply asked for the tasting menu, and my party left our choices in the capable hands of the Jordans and their staff.

Prior to our first course, we were treated to an amuse bouche -- a bite-sized pre-appetizer. In this case, it was a delicious combination of mushroom and duck confit that had a wonderful earthy taste to it, and did an excellent job of putting us in the mood for the meal to follow.

Next up was our appetizer, a rather large portion of salmon tartare served with watercress, saffron sauce, caraway crackers and American paddlefish caviar, along with the basic caviar garnish of egg whites, egg yolk, capers and red onions. It was extremely traditional, but also extremely good.

When our waiter described our second course, goat cheese-stuffed figs wrapped in prosciutto and served with basil pesto, it generated more excitement than any dish of the night. Unfortunately, while it was good, it wasn't as exciting as we'd hoped. (I've had better stuffed figs at Firefly, on Paradise Road, for a lot less money.)

The third course more than made up for the slightly disappointing figs. Described by our waiter as "Louisiana on a plate," it consisted of crispy skinned striped bass with andouille sausage, rock shrimp, fingerling potatoes, hushpuppies and Creole sauce. While it lacked the kick I usually expect from Creole food (my waitress gladly provided house-made hot sauce), I've never had a dish outside of New Orleans that did a better job of replicating that city's signature cuisine.

Course four was even better: a perfectly prepared rack of lamb with fried arugula and rosemary. But our table had mixed reviews of the accompanying mashed potatoes infused with halved Kalamata olives.

Of course, no great meal would be complete without dessert. At Rosemary's, our entire table shared a monstrous "dessert storm": an assortment of chocolate, cakes and other assorted goodies. While everything was incredible, standouts include a simple but delicious rendition of cr me br lee, which was remarkable because of the delicious smoky flavor of the caramelized sugar, which brought to mind campground s'mores. A few of us were also extremely impressed with the goat cheese cheesecake.

Like most restaurants that offer a tasting menu, Rosemary's offers a wine pairing (\$50), providing a different glass of wine to complement each of the five courses. But they also offer something a bit more rare in the fine dining world: a beer pairing. And while \$35 is a bit steep for five small servings of beer (none was even close to a full 12 ounces), each was a perfect match for the accompanying course, and I was glad I shelled out the extra money.

Rosemary's is definitely worth a visit, regardless of how many courses you plan to eat. But with a price 30 percent to 40 percent less than most comparable experiences on The Strip, the chef's tasting is a bargain everyone should experience at least once.

Rosemary's Restaurant

8125 W. Sahara Ave.

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