

The Miami Herald

Posted on Thu, Nov. 05, 2009

Review | Charlotte Bistro: The chocolate soup makes up for missteps

BY VICTORIA PESCE ELLIOTT
Special to The Miami Herald



JIPSY

Mismatched chairs and wall mirrors are part of the charm at Charlotte Bistro

Charlotte Bistro is a sassy little flirt. From the moment you catch a glimpse inside the tight-fitting dining room on Miracle Mile where swirly mirrors and framed prints compete for attention, you know this girl has got ambition.

And her name is Charlotte? No, no. The chef-owner is Venezuelan born-Elida Villarroel, who *staged* at Michelin-starred eateries in France after studying at L'Institute Paul Bocuse in Lyon. She and partner Fidel Rotondaro owned an underground restaurant in Caracas, where they cooked for those in the know.

I'd love to say they are charming hosts, but I never met them. Though we visited twice, weeks apart, spending hours in the dollhouse dining room, we never got beyond a kind but hapless waiter who had to scurry to the back for answers to the most basic questions: What is the house wine? Is there cream in the shrimp sauce? And what about the happy-hour menu displayed on the website with \$4-\$8 small plates?

After lengthy *tete-a-tetes* worthy of their own *Fawlty Towers* episode, that last query yielded a half-dozen amuse bouches and an offer of starters from the regular menu at half price.

Six wooden spoons artfully arranged on a slab of gray slate held a harmonious selection of flavors, textures and colors, including a vegetable tart with delicate egg custard and buttery crust, a sprightly dab of ceviche and a too-sweet sliver of soy-glazed tuna.

The best of the appetizers we tried was a restrained French onion soup with a deeply infused onion broth, a few rough-cut croutons and a smattering of richly satisfying Emmental cheese. A pheasant terrine wrapped in bacon and served with butter-cardamom pear slices and toasty pistachios was as pristine as the pretty surroundings.

So-called jumbo langoustine enchants with a subtly creamy coconut curry broth, silky zucchini strips and a hint of cumin, but the crustaceans were more like medium shrimp and cooked until mealy and chewy. A promising roasted eggplant starter with blistered black skin and a heavenly layer of tart tomatoes was seasoned expertly but served so cold that subtle flavors were lost.

A modest French and South American focused wine list has more holes than it should, but prices are reasonable (\$23-\$42).

An enthusiastically recommended entree of Maine lobster ravioli was a huge disappointment with its overly salty broth, overcooked pasta and dearth of meat. A plump chicken breast over a red bell pepper coulis had fine flavor but was a bit dry.

Better than either is the grouper over a celery root puree, though we detected none of the promised merlot reduction or glazed pearl onions. Gorgeously crusted rack of lamb with loads of thyme and rosemary is another qualified success, though, like many dishes here, it was more well-cooked than we like.

Despite missteps along the way, the insanely decadent, multitextured chocolate soup is reason enough to book a reservation. Dark Chuao chocolate, a California-based Venezuelan brand, is conjured into a melty, crunchy, creamy bowl of cakey, almost pudding-like richness that's dotted with espresso-tinged ice cream and a ribbon of buttery cookie for dunking.

Some may find Miss Charlotte pretentious, precious or maybe just too young. I say give her time and she just might grow into a beauty.

Victoria Pesce Elliott reviews Miami-Dade restaurants. E-mail her at

velliott@MiamiHerald.com.

© 2009 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.miamiherald.com>