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Lighting Up

Ninebark chef turns Napa on

BY STETT HOLBROOK

Kelsey McClellan

BRINE TRUST The seasonal, ever-changing pickle plate is one of many great dishes at Matthew Lightner's Ninebark.

The buzz around Matthew Lightner's Ninebark in downtown Napa preceded the restaurant's opening last month.

The curly-haired, bespectacled chef came to Napa from New York, where his cooking at Atera earned him wide acclaim, including two Michelin stars. The Tribeca restaurant offers an 18-course tasting menu that goes for $235, with an additional $195 for wine pairings. That's not what you'll find at Ninebark.

Ninebark's à la carte menu is much more casual and far less pricey than Atera, but Lightner's approachable yet exciting and technically precise cooking is a wonder. The three-level restaurant and bar is a gem that somehow feels like New York to me with its tin-stamped ceiling, brick walls and tiny bathroom sinks made to fit in small spaces. The handsome, first-floor bar offers a few well-chosen snacks—and by all means, order the salt cod beignets ($10), a savory dish of two moist, honey-dabbed, doughnut-like buns piped full of a garlicky cod and potato purée.

The top floor is a swankier lounge with a more inventive cocktail menu (try the Old Ball Game, $16, a riff on an Old Fashioned made with popcorn and peanut–infused rye—think Cracker Jack) and a whiff of leather-steeped grain alcohol served with a single, hand-shaped ice globe. It's supposed to taste like a baseball game complete with essence of catcher's mitt).

The top floor's list of "provisions" is a more sophisticated menu of snacks. The beautifully composed pickle plate ($12) is a must. Seasonal vegetables, like turnips, cherry tomatoes, chile peppers and green beans, are each individually pickled and served with edible flowers on a bed of crushed ice, as is the bracingly fresh flavors of the smoked and cured fish (market price). In addition to the food and drink, the main attraction of the third floor is the rooftop terrace with its sweeping view of the Napa River and Third Street Bridge. The ideal plan is to grab a cocktail on the roof terrace before descending to the second floor to the dining room. That's where the real action is.

An elevator takes you to each floor, and given the distinct personality of each, it feels like riding in a department-store elevator of old ("First floor, women's lingerie; second floor, housewares . . ."). Stepping onto the second floor reveals an open-air kitchen with a tabletop-size Big Green Egg smoker perched on the counter.

The poised kitchen staff is clothed not in the stiff kitchen whites you'd expect of a crew from a top New York restaurant, but in a combination of civvies and snap-button kitchen shirts, a casual style the befits the easy-going vibe of the restaurant. Several of the staff followed their chef out West, a fact that speaks well of Lightner, who runs the kitchen with a cool but careful eye for detail as he sends plates out.

The professionalism extends to the dining room floor. Bartenders, servers and managers move with grace and ease, and know the menu cold. There's a difference between rote memorization and true knowledge of the menu.

My one gripe is the overloud classic rock played in the restaurant. I know this is California and we're cool and casual and all, but the Doobie Brothers and smoked foie gras are a poor match.

Lightner is known for his use of smoke in savory and sweet dishes alike. The Big Green Egg, a ceramic-lined smoker, is a key tool in his kitchen. But this isn't barbecue. Lightner uses smoke as an accent, applying it with a fine brush rather than a mop. Case in point is the smoked foie gras ($25), a quivering orb of duck liver lanced with a needle-like skewer and waved over the smoke, then served with saucy white beans and flecks of fermented black truffle. The barely warmed foie gras picks up the smoke flavor but not enough to overwhelm the dish. It's outstanding.

I also loved the smoke-perfumed roasted sturgeon belly paired with the piney sweetness of shaved raw matsutake mushrooms ($14). So good. The citrus-dressed, barely grilled avocado salad ($12) with kohlrabi was chilled and firm yet retained the flavor of its moments on the grill.

It's not all smoke. The aged beef tartare ($25), coarsely diced ground beef, lobster tail, ahi, pickles and raw egg yolk gets my vote for best of class. I could go on. And I did.

From the list of entrée-sized plates, the charcoal-roasted duck ($38), fanned out like a winning hand of cards, was juicy, tender and meaty. My favorite was the roasted pork neck ($28). I expected pork pulled from the fatty and cartilaginous upper vertebrae, but instead got uncommonly moist slices of meat, like pork tenderloin but with no hint of dryness. Where have butchers been hiding this cut of meat?

The hits kept coming with dessert, also made by Lightner. I've had several variations of s'mores, molar-aching sugar bombs of gummy marshmallow and chocolate, but here the campfire classic ($9) never tasted so good. Best of all was the fig leaf softserve ice cream served with a dried fig wafer dotted with fig and red wine jus and nasturtium petals ($9). Beautiful, light and delicious.

Napa's once moribund dining scene continues to grow in depth and I predict Lightner's elevated but approachable cooking will blow it wide open. Welcome to Napa, chef.

Ninebark, 813 Main St., Napa. 707.226.7821.