

Chicago Tribune

Thursday, June 15

[Back to Print Edition - Thursday At Play](#)

DINING: REVIEW

At Rhapsody, creativity sings

By Phil Vettel

Tribune restaurant critic

Published June 15, 2006

Rhapsody's executive chef, Doran Payne, calls it "Symphony mode."

It's that mad rush when the restaurant, which is part of Symphony Center, is deluged with Chicago Symphony subscribers who arrive en masse around 6:30 p.m. and need to be fed, burped and in their seats by 7:55.

Rhapsody is very good at Symphony mode; the built-for-speed kitchen is quietly efficient, and the progression of customers from dining room to mezzanine is orderly and calm. The trick, said Payne, is reminding his cooks, at 7:45 or so, to ease back on the throttle.

"They tend to cook at the same speed," said Payne. "I have to tell them, 'Let's get out of Symphony mode,' because our customers at 8 p.m. have time for a relaxed, longer dinner."

The Symphony season is at an end--the last performance will be Saturday--which means, paradoxically enough, that this is an ideal time to experience how good this restaurant has become.

Rhapsody's previous chefs have tended to play things very conservatively, producing food that was solid and reliable but rarely raised an eyebrow; those without symphony tickets had no reason to dine here. Since taking over the kitchen last June, Payne has given Rhapsody's food a much-needed spark of creativity and, perhaps more important, a strong culinary identity.

Payne is a native of St. Lucia, and subtle hints of the Caribbean crop up in many of his dishes. "It's not an island menu by any means," Payne said. "But I take things from my own experience and present them in some form."

Thus Payne uses fruit, which is abundant in the Caribbean, as accent pieces in many of his dishes. An orange vinaigrette added sweet and tart notes to a peppery arugula

salad draped with slices of pastrami-style duck. A lemon beurre blanc added bright notes to a meaty crab cake topped with tendrils of fried leek; a lemon-mustard sauce similarly enhanced a plate of carpaccio with caper berries and shaved pecorino cheese.

"Escargots with puff pastry and garlic" sounds like a yawner, but the nifty, updated presentation featured plump and tender escargots with exactly one quarter-sized disk of crispy pastry. And instead of the typical garlic-parsley sauce, there were individual cloves of roasted garlic swimming in a light spring-pea puree. Another visual pleaser was a plate of gnocchi with sauteed shrimp; Payne rolled the potato gnocchi to the same size of the tightly curled shrimp, and the symmetry of the two elements played well against their textural contrasts.

Among main courses, golden pieces of halibut matched well to roasted artichokes and littleneck clams, served around a pile of lemony couscous. Applewood-smoked fava beans were the surprise treat in a grouper entree, the sweet fish presented on a bed of mustard greens.

My pork chop was slightly overdone, but I loved the concept of the dish, which placed the thick chop over sweet-onion marmalade and truffled polenta cake; around the cake was a clever before-and-after pairing of sauteed white grapes and a port-wine reduction.

Rhapsody makes a fine lunch destination; the menu consists of some pared-down entrees from the evening menu, augmented with sandwiches including an indulgent grilled-cheese sandwich made with three cheeses, roasted peppers and grilled onions, served with a cup of soup (a cool cucumber soup for the warm months).

The signature dessert is the Chocolate Symphony, a three-chocolate assortment that includes a richly satisfying dark-chocolate bread pudding, a milk-chocolate pate snuggled in a cookie cup and a miniature chocolate lava cake that oozed ever so slightly when prodded with the fork. The chocolate brownies tasted fine, but it was the mint-infused mandarin-orange coulis that made the dish impressive.

The ambitious beverage program includes inventive cocktails, a good wine list and an attractive selection of by-the-glass pours. And there's an appealing selection of dessert wines and other post-prandial sips, which help make Rhapsody an appealing late-evening option for the post-theater and post-concert crowd. The restaurant also regularly hosts wine-tasting events (typically less structured and less expensive than a formal wine dinner), and next week will present a beer and barbecue tasting.

Rhapsody's outdoor cafe is an attractive, greenery-filled urban garden. It's especially nice in the evening, when the El trains (a Frisbee toss away) aren't running quite so frequently.

The thing that has always puzzled me about this place is that, given the restaurant's name, its location and its customer base (i.e., serious music lovers), Rhapsody has never featured live music in its dining room. Why not a pianist or a jazz trio from time

to time? The regulars would love it, and it would be one way to lure the after-8 crowd.

On the night of one of my visits, chef Payne was visiting with a table of regulars, clearly season subscribers. As they left, one woman bid Payne goodbye with a cheery, "See you next season!"

I hope she was kidding, or perhaps she was embarking upon a three-month cruise the next day. Why abandon Rhapsody in the summer? Not only is this restaurant worth visiting when the orchestra is on hiatus, that also might be the best time to go.

Rhapsody

(star)(star)(star)

65 E. Adams St.

312-786-9911

Open: Dinner Mon.-Sat., lunch Mon.-Fri.

Entree prices: \$21-\$28

Credit cards: A, DC, DS, M, V.

Reservations: Recommended

Noise: Conversation-friendly

Other: Wheelchair accessible; valet parking; no smoking.

Ratings key:

OUTSTANDING (star)(star)(star)(star)

EXCELLENT (star)(star)(star)

VERY GOOD (star)(star)

GOOD (star)

Reviews are based on no fewer than two visits. The reviewer makes every effort to remain anonymous. Meals are paid for by the Tribune.

pveltel@tribune.com

Copyright © 2006, [Chicago Tribune](#)