

## Norfolk restaurant takes you back to Belle Epoque Paris with modern twists

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Every once in a long while a restaurant comes on the scene in Hampton Roads that takes dining to a new place. I took fantastic pleasure in reviewing one the other night. Saint Germain, on Norfolk's Granby Street, reminds me of Belle Epoque Paris, but with very modern twists. It has an old-time feel, with chandeliers set in huge bird cages, large mirrors on the side walls adding an expansive feel, and cured hams set out for carving on the marble bar top.

It is modern in the sense that everything old is new again. It is representative of the new generation of chefs that have discovered the joys of house-made items and local sourcing, plus combining ancient and modern techniques. Add an artful touch in plating, and you have a feast for eyes, nose and mouth.

I enjoy small-plate eating, and the experimentation and camaraderie that go along with it. Saint Germain's menu is perfectly suited to this style of dining, but definitely takes a whilebit to figure out. There are no entrees, and the offerings include a combination of small items, represented by charcuterie and what they call bar snacks, plus boards and large formats, which are meant to be shared. The current large formats are paella and beef Wellington. The boards are larger assortments of the pates, terrines, salumi, and cheeses that make up the charcuterie. Caviar service is also offered.

Amuse-bouches showed up after we settled in, and set the tone for the evening. They were a delightful single bite of perfect small tomato, accompanied by basil mousse, pickled celery, and sea salt, topped with a baby mint leaf. It was an explosion of flavors.

We've been here before and enjoyed some of the house-made sausages, the Bahn Mi, and the chicharones, which are tender fried pig ears. On this outing we went to another part of the menu, but had to reprise the Bahn Mi (\$10).

The Bahn are absurdly good Vietnamese-style sandwiches, filled with pork belly. My companion doesn't normally like that cut of the pig, but she loved the combination of pickled radish and carrot, cilantro, and the steamed Vietnamese bun dyed black with squid ink.

I am not a fan of deviled eggs (\$8), but these were phenomenal. The yolks were made into a truffled mousse, then topped with a bit of sea urchin and salmon roe. A crispy piece of chicken skin added a crunchy texture to the very satisfying bite. At the end we fought over who would get the last dollop of yolk, topped with tiny flowers,

that garnished the plate.

When we saw what looked like fluffy lollipops coming out to other tables, curiosity got the better of us and we put in an order of foie gras torchon (\$4). Oh my gosh, they were fun. Single sticks of rich duck liver with a touch of crunch, surrounded by cardamom-flavored cotton candy, showed up with no instructions. I nibbled away at the fluff, then popped the whole thing in for an absolute rush of taste.

The only partial miss the entire evening was the ceviche of rock shrimp and seasonal sea provisions (\$12). Don't get me wrong, the flavors of the shrimp, squid, and fish along with the tomatoes, mango and sweet potato were bright and brilliant. The accompanying taro chips provided a nice offsetting crisp. The only thing that did not make sense was the coconut. It was called out as an ingredient, but appeared only as a clever serving bowl. The remaining flavors were spot on.

Saint Germain's emphasis on house-made items was shown off in the Vietnamese chicken liver pate (\$8). A jar of pate was topped by coarsely cut orange fennel marmalade, then served with crisp fennel and caraway flatbread. Finishing off the plate was an assortment of pickled cauliflower, grapes, cantaloupe, carrot, and cabbage, each with a different treatment. For good measure, some of the cabbage was kim chi, which supplied a great kick of heat.

A couple of desserts were offered that evening, and we went with the textures of chocolate (\$10). As with the rest of dinner, no two bites from the plate were the same. Chocolate appeared as foam, crumbles, meriingue, coffee-infused chocolate granules, and liquid (the outside sealed by dropping it in liquid nitrogen bath). A bite of custardy chocolate layer cake finished it all off.

The meal ended with a complementary plate of mignardises. These are bite-sized desserts – sort of a counterbalance to the amuse- bouches that started the meal – and one more chance for the chefs to show their stuff. The lavender meriingue drops, chocolate macaroon, and carrot cardamom petit four capped off a lovely evening.

I really liked the team approach to service. It was light-hearted and professional, everyone on the floor working to keep the room happy.

Saint Germain takes dining in Hampton Roads to a very different place, and I loved the journey.

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