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Elixia, sister restaurant to Saint Germain, offers a blend of flavors and textures

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Rumaki, sweet tropical dates with Saint Germain's mexican chorizo, cream cheese, house-cured bacon and chipotle carmel at Elixia in downtown Norfolk, Va., on Sept. 2, 2016.

A while back I was excited to learn that Saint Germain was taking over the space next door on Granby Street. Instead of expansion, they decided to go for creating a new restaurant. The name, Elixia, is a sly nod to the alchemical “Elixir of Life” that the 18th century Comte Saint Germain was said to have used to live over 1,000 years. With luck, Elixia will have a long, happy life on Granby Street.

The atmosphere of the place is very comfortable, and Elixia managed to get rid of the long, dark cave feeling that used to haunt this space. The walls have been lightened, and a padded, golden backrest now runs the length of the dining area. Add comfy upholstered chairs, and you have a great space to nosh the night away with friends, or pop in for an evening snack.

With a name like Elixia, you would expect the place to have some pretty good quaffs. The drink menu was nicely tuned to the Spanish and South American theme, with reasonably priced rums, cachaças, tequilas and mescals – in

addition to a fine selection of beers and a few wines. One of the tables near us was enjoying a tiki bowl for two. I guess this punch bowl with two straws craze has now hit Norfolk.

My partner enjoyed the Margareyes (\$10), their dry twist on a margarita with a kick of chili liquor and chili salt. I went with O'Connor's El Guapo, my local go-to when a place doesn't have Dismal Swamp.

Elixia's menu is in my favorite format, with lots of interesting offerings spread between small plates, tapas, pintxos, tacos and sandwiches. For the uninitiated, pintxos are similar to tapas – small nibbles, usually skewered and served to accompany drinks. We started early, and made a pleasant evening of ordering a couple of things at a time, and watching the place start to fill up. It was an interesting mix of friends out for dinner, a solo diner and what seemed to be a crew from one of the luxury yachts at the waterfront. Not bad for a few days after officially opening.

We started our first round with Patatas Bravas (\$8) and Rumaki (\$8), which set the tone and expectation for the whole night. They were great.

The patatas were crisply fried potato pieces, dressed in a sofrito sauce. The cooked-down concoction of onions, peppers and tomatoes was kicked up nicely with a bit of heat and a light touch of truffle. Taking it even further was a generous dollop of saffron aioli.

The rumaki were from the pintxo menu. Sweet dates were stuffed with cheese and chorizo, wrapped in bacon, then grilled to perfection. What put this over the top were the swirls of chipotle caramel painted onto the plate. We used the dates to get up every last bit of this wonderful stuff. A perfect balance of sweet and savory.

Our next set included a pintxo of Spanish blood sausage, charred onion, potato and pepper. (\$5.50 for 3) This tasted good, but I was disappointed that the onion was a couple of rings instead of the charred scallion called for in the menu.

The second part of the set were the tacos al pastor (\$5.50 for 2). These were delightful street-style tacos, each served with two, small house-made tortillas, and filled with roasted pork and pickled pineapple. As with the sausage pintxos, there was one minor flaw. Our waitress said they were out of the crispy pork rind, so the chicharron called for in the menu was missing. Even then, we would have ordered more.

One of the things we noticed about Elixia was the wonderful blend of both flavors and textures in all of the dishes. As with its sister restaurant next door, every plate had interesting and tasty things going on. This is on top of very artful

plating.

We finished the main part of the meal with an order of shrimp ceviche (\$8) and a pork belly pintxo (\$5.50 for 3).

The ceviche was my least favorite of the evening. Part of the magic of this dish is when all of the ingredients pop, and the addition of heirloom tomatoes, mango and cucumbers held great promise. The shrimp was nicely cooked in whatever citric acid they used, but none of that bright flavor carried to the other items. The tomatoes and mangos were not quite there from a flavor standpoint. It seemed as if the shrimp were added to a watery mix of the fruits and vegetable.

The pork belly was very good, and the cilantro gastrique definitely was a nice, tangy touch. Its only shortcoming was that the menu called for compressed watermelon. What we got seemed like a regular loose chunk cut from the melon, with none of the firm texture and concentrated sweetness I was expecting.

We finished with the Oaxacan Chocolate Flan (\$6). This semisweet Mexican-style flan was served with chocolate wafers and dollops of a wonderfully flavored orange cream. A satisfying end to a satisfying evening.

We visited Elixia in the first week it opened, so a few little flaws didn't bother us as they continue to work out any kinks. The food and the menu style hit the right buttons for me, and the service staff seemed like they had been working well with each other – and customers – for years. What's more, the prices are very reasonable.

Elixia is great reason for popping into downtown Norfolk. I'd put it into your plans for tapas hopping with your friends along Granby – or for a long, leisurely evening of cruising the menu in one of its comfortable chairs.