

Denveater

Deconstructing Denver's dining scene—& beyond—dish by dish.

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May 07, 2010

Dispatch from Boston 2010: The Makings of a Neo-Classic—Russell House Tavern

Diamond in the rough: that's been the position of chef Michael Scelfo for years. From the North Street Grille to The Good Life to Temple Bar, he was the bright—& occasionally, if circumstances allowed, downright brilliant—spot against some rather dull backdrops.

At **Russell House Tavern**, he's finally landed in the showease setting he deserves. Open only a few weeks, the subterranean dining room already feels like the right place at the right time—urbane yet convivial with its high ceilings, low warm lighting, clean lines, & sleek gleaming wood & marble surfaces. And the menu is just the right thing for the right place at the right time: running from New England raw bar to wine bar to gastropub & back again, the spectrum as a whole is characteristically Scelfo's: as playful, colorful, & robust as contemporary American cuisine can get without sacrificing refinement.

Cases in point: the chilled lobster pot



& the butcher's choice pizza.



We were advised to thoroughly mix the contents of the former to get the full effect: not only fresh lobster meat but also brunoise diced potatoes, chorizo aioli & crunchy combread crumbs. I'm one of those weirdos who considers lobster overrated as an in-the-shell delicacy & underrated as a team player, & this dish proves my point deliciously, the crustacean's creamy sea-sweetness combining so well with the salty & earthy aspects of the rest. If you think about it—shellfish, corn, potatoes, sausage—it's essentially an inspired mini-lobster bake.

As for the pizza—oh, the pizza. Atop an unusual, almost layered & flaky crust—less like classic pizza dough & more like a *pâte brisée* or something—were fontina, mushrooms (cremini? porcini?), & crispy chunks of, be still my engorged heart, smoked, cured lamb belly. Irresistibly bold, the smoky tinges kept it from seeming overly rich.

And that's really the key to the style of all my favorite chefs ever, from **David Nevins**, **José Duarte**, **Ana Sortun** & **Jamie Bissonnette** back east to **Frank Bonanno**, **Scott Parker** & **Pete List** in Denver (to name just a few)—no one would call their cooking subtle, but no one can deny how carefully they balance the strong flavors they favor.

So the serrano ham—grilled, I think—is accented with pickled pears & manchego bruléed with honey.



And so the charcuterie board smartly varies from salami & house-cured duck ham to a distinctly spicy, prosciutto-wrapped pâté de campagne, pork rillettes & some of the best chicken liver spread, sweetened with marsala, I've ever had. Put it on toast with the honeyed fig jam (top left).



& it all goes down like a PB&J.

A round of brioche surrounded by pecorino aioli & topped with a breaded, perfectly poached egg & bits of pancetta



might well have been too luscious for more than a bite or two if not for the chiffonade of greens that gave the dish a refreshing, bitter edge.

Ditto the fresh peas & grilled ramps in the hearth-baked pasta (conchiglie with fontina & breadcrumbs).



It was great to see so much Colorado lamb on Boston menus; the Director's slow-braised shank with smoked lamb breast & stewed black lentils was great, period. As dark as it looks in the photo, that's how it tasted—deep, dark & soulful.



Scelfo's take on Chinese salt-&-pepper shrimp was also terrific—heavier than the standard, but rightly, IMO, given that he uses especially sweet, plump Laughing Birds & pairs them with Tabasco aioli.

I was too painfully full to even try the short nb Wellington,



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As an early proponent of Scelfo's, I'm just so damn glad to see him making his mark so with such confidence, grace & pizzazz.