

Digging in

Tasty morsels about Chicago's food scene

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A new blog for the fattest of days

JANET RAUSA FULLER



Sun-Times Food editor Janet Rausa Fuller is always thinking about her next meal.

LISA DONOVAN



For almost 20 years now, reporter Lisa Donovan has been hitting Chicago's neighborhood markets and restaurants not only for the best grub at the best prices but also as a way to understand the city's melting pot.

JAMES SCALZITTI



As Rhoda Morgenstern would say, food is the first thing Sun-Times Wire Service reporter James Scalzitti remembers liking that liked him back..

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A Sepia-tinted evening at the James Beard House

By Janet Fuller on March 23, 2010 10:19 AM | Permalink | Comments (0)

Story and photos by guest blogger and New York writer Seanan Forbes:

Last Thursday, [Sepia](#) came to the James Beard House, 127 W. 12th, in New York. For the guests, it was an exceptional event. For the Beard House crew, it was love.

It's hard to know when the food world's most sophisticated staff fell for [Andrew Zimmerman](#) (at right), but they fell hard and wholly. Mark this, because they're a hard crew to impress. Food-defining multi-course meals, prepared by chefs who've flown in from across the planet? Every day, man. They do this every day.

Those who have been stoveside with Zimmerman will not be surprised. Whatever space Sepia's chef inhabits, it is intoxicating.

Being in the kitchen with Zimmerman is like taking a tour of Wonderland with Lewis Carroll. There's even a lexicon:

Charation: Is the char cooking?
Janky: Kind of, but not quite, like hinky (See also *janked*, as in "That [broken] scallop is janked.")
Glazation: The act of becoming glazed.

In the Beard House kitchen, words were cut from air, used to garnish sentences and either discarded or recycled, depending on context and need.

I arrived at 1 o'clock, in the full flush of prep time. Pots, pans and people were like atoms: jammed and moving. Zimmerman was cutting carrots into precise lozenges. A moment later, he was on the far side of the space, joining pastry chef Cindy Schuman for a measurement conference. Should the lemon shortbread biscuits be 2-by-4? 2-by-3-3/4? 2x3-9/16?

The pace picked up around snatched bites of pizza. Sous chef Miles Schaefer juggled ingredients and tasks. Mint was minced in one corner; fresh vegetables, pureed in another. Cook Shea Montanez appeared to be attached to the oven by invisible chains. There, he coaxed [Three Sisters Garden's](#) grits (soon to be united with shrimp) and English pea soup to perfection.

Taking me at my word that I had affinities for the minute and the detailed, Zimmerman assigned me a series of small, painstaking tasks - but "painstaking" was everywhere. One intern gave orbs of frozen liquid foie gras two layers of coating. Another composed a Bremen Town version of headcheese (below), each layer smaller than the one below, until it got to the stage of tweezers and embryonic leaves. Thin slices of avocado formed beds for house-cured sardines complemented by scallions and lemon. Schaefer decapitated Illy paper cups, making short towers to hold plastic wrap away from careful constructions of appetizers.



Schuman set me to baking shortbread. Whatever their measurements, the sweet biscuits looked elegant. Once baked and glazed, they joined their cousins in the rack: swirls of lime, checkerboards of chocolate and vanilla rimmed with red, breath-delicate brown tuilles, infant Linzer tarts and thick pecan squares.

From the buzz, Zimmerman's voice emerged: "Thirteen of those and eight of these, for a grand total of not enough." Bustle converged on need.

Between discussions and instructions, time marked itself with scent:

- 1:49 p.m. smelled like Eden: fresh herbs, bright vegetables, pea soup reminiscent of a spring garden.
- 4:07 p.m., warm, buttery artichokes
- 4:12 p.m. was all mint, scythe-sharp and intense

The Beard House staff arrived, made suggestions about flow and service and disappeared to arrange tables. Zimmerman had filled every seat in the house.

Guests grinned through the kitchen, greedily eyeing their future. Appetizers were rolling: sardines and headcheese being plated; balls of foie being turned to hot liquid. Squeezing by, people greeted Zimmerman as if he were the rock star he once wanted to be. (If you meet him, ask about curiously strong mints. The answer won't be Altoids.)

The chef dotted a plate with precise spots of aioli and flew to another task. An overeager photographer removed half of the aioli with her jacket. Everybody in the kitchen had nine jobs and was doing 10. I grabbed the pastry bag and piped aioli spots, praying for accuracy.

The soup, an exercise in precision plating, had three people working in carefully choreographed unison. From ricotta quenelles through greens to bright nasturtiums, the square plates defined the imminent season. (Springtime was two days away.) Garnished dishes, in all of their delicate beauty, were set before the guests, and soup was poured at the table.

"The first 20 plates are the hardest," Zimmerman observed.



There was barely time to appreciate the simple visual of round scallop beside dark square of black pudding. Zimmerman called, "Do I have charation?" Char was happening, a voice assured from the far side of a wall.

Plates, fish and other elements appeared. The chef moved from space to space, unflappable, observing, encouraging, nudging, tweaking, keeping everything running smoothly. When an intern grew flustered, Zimmerman spoke quietly, his voice cutting through confusion. "Stop. Breathe. Okay. Start again." And all was well.

The char went out, with sauerkraut, mustard, apple and toasted rye gnocchi. The interns and I took advantage of a lull and grabbed a couple of leftover gnocchi apiece. They were light and breadly, the sort of food you taste once and then crave on a regular basis, at home and away.

Next up, rounds of porchetta-style rabbit with morels, asparagus and jus. "It's easy plating," Zimmerman promised: morels to either side, asparagus atop morels, rabbit in the middle. Schaefer appeared, provided and vanished, a Cheshire Cat with a red bandanna and an endless grin. Plates shimmied down the line. My gloved fingers were slick with asparagus. 75 dishes went by magically, both interminably and swiftly.

One of the Beard crew appeared, told us that we had a few minutes of breathing room and added, "I love your kitchen, chef." Hot hands grabbed bottles of cold water. Supplanting Montanez, Schaefer plated dishes with generous mounds of morels and asparagus.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"It's for the dishwashers," Schaefer crooned. "Gonna show 'em some love."

The clean counters were ready for one last savory course: thick diagonal cuts of lamb loin with artichokes, white bean puree and salsa verde. In comparison with the soup, the lamb was simple. Better than going from easy to complex while moving from wired to tired - but complexity was about to return.

In the next room, bordered by five tables and a tall rack, Schuman was arranging dessert. Numbered plates bore handmade truffles (mango, Earl Grey, ancho chile . . .) and sweet biscuits, each as distinctively shaped as flavored.

Tasks were given: five drops of blueberry curving along each plate, lemon shortbread set on a plump drop of lemon-ricotta cream, more cream swirled atop the shortbread, almond granola scattered, candied lemon sprinkled like fairy dust . . . and it was a day.

Every chef who comes to the Beard House speaks with the guests. Zimmerman had to do it thrice: once in the boardroom, once in the room between kitchen and garden and once in the dining room.

The questions in every guest's mouth pertained to blood pudding. These weren't the squeamish queries of people anticipating an incitement of repugnance - ew, pig's blood. These were the tender questions of people who have discovered a new illicit pleasure . . . and like it.

Guests finished their wine and coffee and disappeared, slowly, reluctantly, into their separate nights. Zimmerman and company reclaimed lost spoons, sipped glasses of wine, chased [Templeton rye](#) with shots of pickle juice, and kept packing.

At this point, anybody else would have been getting nods and nudges and reminders of the hour. As far as the Beard House was concerned, Sepia's crew could stay until the colors of the world faded to aged photo. Members of the house staff had clocked out and were lingering. Nobody wanted the night to end, and everybody wanted to taste just one more moment of the love.

Tags: andrew zimmerman, chef, dinner, house, james beard, kitchen, sepia

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