

## The world on a plate

La Degustation spins a compelling culinary adventure  
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Jan Přerovský/THE PRAGUE POST

Awaiting the onslaught: kitchen and tables prepared for a three-hour feast.

It is an experience more than a meal. It is a narrative in 13 chapters, with a storyline that slinks along, then jumps, calms down, shouts, fades away, lurches suddenly forward and keeps you enthralled for three hours. In the end, you realize that you've been involved in a story deceptively simple but skilled in construction, with only a few wayward moments to hinder the denouement.

It is La Degustation, the newest establishment in the Ambiente line and perhaps the finest. At the moment, it's definitely the most intriguing dining experience in Prague.

As the name suggests, the restaurant serves set multicourse menus. The *Bohème Bourgeoise* updates the Czech basics and draws on worldly flavors to create a kind of collision cuisine. *Continentale* explores fine ingredients from around Europe. And *Bohème Traditionnelle* finds inspiration in classic recipes to prove, as our waiter explained, the beauty of centuries-old Czech fare.

The event begins with an amuse bouche, in this case silky herbal beef tartare sandwiched between thin slices of crisped bread. Several more teasers throughout the evening close chapters in the procession or bridge distinct courses. Many are masterpieces themselves, such as ravioli filled with lobster and prawn in a strange, stunning sauce of vanilla and prawn that smacks vaguely of dessert before plummeting into salty-sweet-bitter depths. It's perfect against the pasta.

The *Bourgeoise* menu roams comfortably at the start, through Patanegra ham and a showcase of natural sugars in distinctly different form, an onion consommé with Granny Smith apple. Then the intensity begins to build, plateaus for a moment, and finally launches into one last skyrocketing crescendo. Kobe-style beef (Wagyu beef imported from Australia rather than Japan) in miso broth is a somewhat awkward first step. The concept works, and the soup itself is superb, but if the kitchen has one consistent weakness, it's a tendency to overcook beef. The meat isn't hurt badly, mind you — it's good and rich. Still, it fears heat, curdling under too much of it and quickly losing the excessive fatty flavors that make Wagyu so prized.

On more solid ground with familiar ingredients, the next course — smoked duck breast with horseradish cream and organic pumpkin puree — opens up an extraordinary passage. The chef reins in and tames wild flavors while unleashing the mundane. Game bird ends up as tender, its earthy character consumed by smoke, which is itself transformed into a wonderfully compelling sweet and tangy essence. On the other side of things, the puree tastes like you've just bitten into the flesh of a dozen pumpkins, all at once, such is the wallop packed into an innocent mash.

The *Bourgeoise* menu plateaus, momentarily, with an unexpectedly meek New Zealand lamb chop. Garlic confit holds you in place, nicely bittersweet in the nature of roasted sugar. Another simple puree, this time of carrot, kick-starts the adventure again: bright and loud, with extensive flavors that range far and wide across the palate, all screaming "carrot." Wagyu beef entrecote (unfortunately cooked to medium) with roasted organic beet, wasabi puree and ginger chutney keeps the momentum, particularly thanks to the ginger chutney — a small dollop that's boundless, aggressively acquisitive, biting sarcasm and devious in effect.

The *Continentale* menu brings the world in several plates. It starts with a Tsarskaya oyster in Rhine sauce, backed up by a most expressive Hokkaido pumpkin soup. After that follows delicate and flakey Atlantic halibut, poached in milk. The elegant trio lulls you into what might be called serene complacency. You are, therefore, fodder for the next three courses, designed to knock your palate back down to earth amongst lowly ingredients, provoked and then let loose. Smoked beef tongue, for instance, is exquisitely meaty and rustic, yet also shorn from its element by a sweet and sour sauce. Pigeon breast is stuffed with foie gras and wrapped in marinated cabbage. In combination, the barnyard qualities of the squab gentrify, rebounding as a rich and complex game bird.

To tie up this plot twist, the kitchen employs more foie gras, this time in parfait form, atop a medallion of organic Argentine beef, supported by gelled cubes of sauternes, sitting in a pool of red wine reduced with pan drippings. Complicated, perhaps — but there on one plate are the various story lines pulled into final resolution. Much of the beef exported from Argentina now spends time on a feedlot. This, however, has the mellow, grassy wealth favored by fans of Southern Hemisphere cuts. Introducing air into the foie

gras reminds you of the ethereal dishes trotted out to begin the meal. Everything else strikes sweet, tart, rich and earthy notes.

Few narratives end with a bang, of course. Typically, there are a few pages to help you recover from the unpredictable swings and rapid pacing of the climax. La Degustation manages this with a cheese course, dessert (chocolate with 37 percent cocoa butter from the South Pacific) and a few tidbits while the wait staff tabulates your bill.

If all of this makes it sound like a stiff, formal place, keep in mind the restaurant's Ambiente Group origins. Service is efficient, informed and quite friendly. At one point a server, explaining the course just laid on the table, said, "And this is ... I forget." She had not blanked out on the dish, but on the English translation. Nothing held her back from chuckling about the dead air. Later, a waiter jokingly berated my dining companion for passing most of her meat in my direction. It's the prerogative of a critic, but he assumed the procession of courses was taking a toll.

And it is a procession: small plates, large in number, telling of things that will keep you mesmerized for an evening, and beyond.

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