

Wednesday, October 28, 2009

Local 127 (Review)

Locavore-focused dining is a welcome addition to downtown

By Anne Mitchell



Critic's Pick

Local 127 isn't the electricians' union. The "Local" part is about the local food movement. According to Executive Chef Steven Geddes, "127 (W. Fourth St.) is our address, and we start there. Everything is sourced as close to this address as possible."

"Locally sourced" isn't always locally grown and harvested, but that's OK. No offense to the Ohio River, but I'm not sure that locally-harvested seafood is a concept anyone in Cincinnati would applaud. So Local 127 has some "imports" like Atlantic halibut, Malden sea salt, spices and coffee beans. But there's no compromise on the most important element of its menu: flavor.

On the way in, we stopped at the bar and asked for a beverage recommendation. I was surprised that the bartender suggested a Ramos gin fizz (\$9), a complicated but delicious New Orleans drink with frothed egg whites and loads of citrus. Or, as my friend keenly observed, lemon meringue pie with a kick. Delightful and definitely a sophisticated, well-crafted cocktail. We also tried the local rosé champagne-based pink lemonade (\$7), fizzy and festive.

The lounge next door to Local 127, Tonic, will be open by the time this review goes to press and claims a real commitment to cocktail culture. (Local 127 is in the space formerly occupied by Jean-Robert at Pigall's, while Tonic is the former Twist Lounge space.) You'll be able to order a sidecar, a Sazerac or a perfect Manhattan made with rye, not bourbon, without seeming like an eccentric or a poseur.

There's not much we didn't try at Local 127, for two reasons: First, we wanted to try everything, and second, the menu is manageable. It changes with availability of ingredients, of course, and the night we were there it featured seven "cured and pickled" appetizers, seven vegetable-focused small plates, seven protein-focused large plates, four desserts and a cheese plate.

Our server was completely laid back. There was always someone nearby when we had a question or an empty water glass, but they never felt obtrusive or pushy.

One of the most incredible dishes of the evening was one we didn't order but that the chef sent out as an amuse bouche. It was an amazing creamy risotto (\$12 as a small plate) full of plump, fresh wild mushrooms and mild herbs, accented with preserved lemon. It's not a show-off dish, but a perfect risotto is a sign of a confident chef.

From the cured and pickled list, my favorite bite was the pork belly confit and radish (\$9), which paired rich, salty bacon flavor with tangy chutney. We also liked the paper-thin prosciutto (\$8) that was served with vinegary cucumber rings. All the pickles are made in-house, as are most of the cured meats.

The delicious Three-Alarm Trout (\$8) is named after the smoke alarms set off in the building while it was being smoked. Even the menus are printed in house, which we discovered when our crew of grammar freaks pointed out an apostrophe error and our server brought us a new, corrected menu.

The Squash Soup (\$7), a puree of Delicata, came to the table in a Mason jar — an affectation maybe, but it allowed the flash-fried garlic slices and toasted pumpkin seeds to stay crisp. The Potato Skins (\$6) were layered with crisp crumbled bacon and a surprising foam of white cheddar mashed potatoes that kept them fun without being heavy.

Golden and Red Beets (\$8) were roasted and diced, served with whipped sour cream — good idea. We ordered this without the Copa ham as an accommodation to our vegetarian guest, a sacrifice made easier since we'd indulged in two other pork accents already.

I confirmed on follow-up that Geddes, like most foodies, is passionate about pork, using all of the parts and handling it with respect. But he's just as enthusiastic about beets. He loves having vegetarian guests and will gladly tailor a meal to their tastes.

All of our starters went beautifully with the Mossback Pinot Noir (\$26.50), a blend of pinot and syrah that was nice, fruity and light. The wine selection is thorough but not intimidating.

I ordered Bison steak (\$28) for my main course, and it was impressive — perfectly medium rare, sliced and served with crumbles of feta and crisp fried green tomato chips. Bison isn't gamey (it's like beef amped up in taste) and 127's bison is farm raised in Ohio.

Pork Cutlet (\$19), dipped in breadcrumbs and pan fried, was served with creamy cheese grits and savory cabbage. The Burger (\$14) is ground in-house and served with crisp, petitecut French fries and delicious house-made catsup.

The menu is light on seafood, of course.

The Atlantic Halibut (\$21) was perfectly cooked and beautifully presented with sautéed fresh spinach and wild rice. I was pleasantly surprised by Chicken Two Ways (\$17), a fried chicken breast served over confit of the dark meat, an excellent combination. When I asked Geddes about the dish, he said, "Food needs to taste like the ingredient that it is." Amen to that.

The Local Cheese Plate (\$11) was a beautiful selection of soft and hard cheeses with sliced pears and honeycomb — again, something for every taste. The not-local French press coffee (\$7 for two) was perfect.

Everything about the evening was absolutely satisfying. The pace, the service, the food, the wine — all excellent.

And don't be skeptical about the "local" concept. Pioneers like Slims and Nectar began the local movement here, and as they bought from small farmers and producers and shopped at Findlay Market they helped the farmers and the market. This strengthened the loyalty of the suppliers, who committed themselves to bringing in a good variety of fresh, mostly organically grown crops that tasted better.

It's a win-win for the businesses, for local diners and for home cooks as well, who've seen the quality and quantity of farmers markets increase in the last few years. It's keeping endangered heritage breeds of pork and chicken alive by creating demand.

The only local element Geddes vowed to increase is local music on the restaurant's soundtrack. How can you not love that?

LOCAL 127

Go: 127 W. Fourth St., Downtown

Call: 513-721-1345

Hours: 5:30-10 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday; 5:30-11 p.m. Friday and Saturday

Entrée Prices: \$17-\$28

Payment: Major credit cards

Accessibility: Lounge has a wheelchair lift. Restaurant is fully accessible.

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