

L. MAY EATERY ALMOST A TEENAGER WITHOUT THE ANGST

BY SUNIL MALAPATI

“Success is the sum of small efforts, repeated day in and day out”

These words by old time self-help guru Robert Collier are especially applicable to the continued success of L. May Eatery, the mainstay of the resurgent upper Main St for the past decade. Twelve years old, almost a teenager, the fine dining establishment keeps chugging along with a network of relationships both with local producers and patrons. This seemed an opportune moment to revisit L. May and take a measure of how things have changed while staying the same!

Dubuque by now is home to quite a few eateries where chefs create exciting dishes using locally-sourced ingredients and classic culinary techniques. When L. May (named after grandmother Lillian May) started back in 2007, Pepper Sprout was the only model EJ May, the proprietor, had. The block of Main Street between 10th and 11th was just being refurbished after years of neglect, and the space next to River Lights Bookstore and Freddie’s Popcorn became available. EJ initially wanted a bar with a small restaurant, but the new space necessitated changes to his thinking. In the beginning, there was a bit of everything on the menu. Over the years, small deliberate changes based on patron feedback and attention by the chef and owners have focused the menu and imbued it with a viewpoint. I sat down with EJ and Chef Tony for a conversation about the continued evolution of food and hospitality.

Among the myriad changes in food habits over the past decade, two trends stand out: the attention paid to sourcing food and the rise of allergies and sensitivities. Diners routinely want to know more about where their food is coming from and often place a premium



STEAK BLEU SALAD

on local and sustainable foods. L. May has cultivated a network of local suppliers and has recently started to grow their own food in a small farm plot by Menominee, IL. As he talked about his relationships with his suppliers, EJ grew more and more animated. EJ drives to Mineral Point, WI to get blue cheese because Hook’s Cheese does not deliver, and while he is there, he will look up Nico from Bryant Family Farms who supplies chicken, duck, both duck and chicken eggs. Even the honey is locally-sourced from Walsh Apiary and finds its way into wonderful drinks like the Honey Lavender Martini. I could use the entire column just telling those stories, but since I want to get to the food I will resist the temptation! A long list of local producers within a 50-mile radius can be found at the bottom of their menu.

The rise of gluten intolerance among other allergies and sensitivities has forced restaurants to develop new strategies for their menus. The rise in vegetarian and vegan diets has increased the complexity. EJ is very aware of the issues having a daughter with Celiac disease and diabetes. The menu at L. May clearly identifies dishes as being vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free and gluten-reduced. In many cases, these dishes are not afterthoughts but created with a special attention to detail to be gluten-free and vegan-friendly. I also appreciated their thoughtful note at the bottom of the menu that the kitchen does not have specific allergen-free preparation areas or dedicated ovens. For most people with gluten insensitivity or mild-Celiac disease, the small possibility of cross-contamination is not an issue. For people with severe gluten allergies, this is an issue, and I was glad to see it addressed. EJ did assure me that they take special care with gluten-free pizzas with their own designated pans.

The Stuffed Bell Pepper highlights both the above discussed trends as well as the food philosophy of the place. A large red bell pepper is roasted and stuffed with jasmine rice, locally sourced mushrooms and seasonal vegetables, sprinkled with toasted cashews, and served with



CRABBY SHRIMP

a coconut curry sauce. All the vegetables are perfectly cooked with the asparagus and cauliflower retaining their bite while the pepper is softened by the heat. The rice is delicately flavored while the curry sauce is complex and robust. The dish offers an interesting look into fusing French techniques with Asian flavors. Fine dining usually offers ingredients cooked separately, gathered harmoniously and tied together with a sauce. The chef can thus get every ingredient textured just right and impart flavor through the sauce. Asian cooking, especially the curries, involve cooking all the ingredients in the sauce it will be served in, with a starch like rice as the accompaniment. I was impressed with how Chef Tony managed to create an aromatic sauce redolent of Indian spices while staying true to his culinary training.

One of the key aspects I look forward to during my visits to L. May is Chef Tony’s sauce work. The balance and depth of flavors in the sauces is commendable. On a recent visit, I tasted a tangy romesco sauce, a wonderfully light white wine lemon tarragon sauce, and a bleu cheese dressing, and each provided the perfect backdrop for the dishes they were supporting. The romesco is a blend of roasted red pepper, tomato, and almonds adding a modulated acidic note to a roasted garlic risotto that accompanied the stuffed chicken. The chicken itself was stuffed with two cheeses, spicy Italian sausage*, artichokes, sundried tomatoes and spinach. The well composed dish let the ingredients work in harmony, but it was the romesco that tied everything together. The white wine lemon tarragon sauce was the base for a variation of the “Oscar style” crabby shrimp. Typically, “Oscar style crab” is served on a steak with hollandaise or Bearnaise sauce. The lighter L. May version paired it with jumbo shrimp on top of a lemon rice pilaf, the sharp acidity of lemon in both the rice and the sauce complementing each other without domineering over the seafood. The bleu cheese dressing flavored the Steak Bleu Salad with its hearty portions of black angus beef tips, greens and vegetables. The funky bleu cheese flavor came through without overpowering the other ingredients—as someone who dislikes bleu cheese, I loved this dressing and that should indicate the level of balance found in this dressing.

* Note that the Italian sausage is really spicy. They source it from an old time producer as a long rope that is then slow roasted to perfection.

The sauces and dressings are not limited to entrees and salads. The hearty red sauce on the pizza is a lovely



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STUFFED BELL PEPPER



APPLE CRISP

base for the toppings, especially the spicy Italian sausage*. The pizza is always a favorite, and L. May usually offers at least a few options including vegetarian toppings and gluten-free crusts. They do change them periodically and my all-time favorite is the one with butternut squash and spicy Italian sausage* (sadly not on the menu right now, but I live in hope for the next menu change!) I may be obsessed with their spicy Italian sausage!

One of the benefits of a periodically changing menu is finding interesting dishes I have not tried before. The Veggie Ceviche on their current menu had me intrigued. Ceviche is traditionally seafood “cooked” without heat in a mixture of acids, typically lime juice and orange juice. The vegan L. May version uses hearts of palm as the “meat” with the onion, bell pepper, tomato, cucumber, and jalapeño providing the crunch and fresh oregano and cilantro as the herbal component. I expected a certain bracing acidity from the ceviche, but the lime juice was quite modest and let the hearts of palm shine, the oregano adding a distinct flair. Warm tortilla chips proved a perfect accompaniment. EJ informed me that this appetizer has been quite a hit with the vegan crowd, who appreciate a dish designed as a vegan dish and not a poor meat substitute thrown in as a sop (for the record, the Impossible burger just sounds wrong).

The idea of designing dishes built around patron restrictions without sacrificing quality or creativity appeals to me as an educator. This inclusivity is incorporated into the menu from starters to desserts. Of course there are gluten-free options available, like a gluten free-cheesecake from Georgia Mihalakis.

But it is the vegan and gluten-free apple crisp with coconut blackberry ice cream that really caught my attention. Apples baked with rolled oats on top are set off perfectly with the coconut blackberry ice cream. Coconut milk gives a texture somewhere between milk cream and shaved ice and works well with blackberries both in texture and flavor.

A well designed menu is the restaurateur’s food philosophy in microcosm. Even a cursory glance at L. May’s menu indicated efforts made to incorporate a range of local producers and please a wide range of patrons. EJ indicated he wants to be at that nexus between sourcing food and serving it, being with the food from the farm to the table. It is clear he enjoys working with the producers as much as he enjoys standing in the middle of a crowded eatery happy with the smiles that accompany the food. L. May is going to be a teenager soon, but it does feel all grown up, continuing to evolve without the angst. ■



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