

LAVENDER

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AS FEATURED

Where There's Smoke, There's Fire Lake



DINING OUT BY CARLA WALDEMAR

Full circle. Hark back a dozen years, and the swell dining rooms you knew - the chandeliers, the harpist, the waiters in tuxedos - were in our hotels. The Sofitel, the Marquette, the Marriott, the Northstar, the Raddison: You whispered as if you were in church.

Waiters, drilled like a precision marching corps, held chairs, unfurled napkins, and removed those silver cloche plate coverings in unison, almost daring you to eat. You paid to feel like the pretender to the throne, then stayed away till your next birthday.

Well, the times, a fellow Minnesotan said, they are a-changin'. No more Windows on Minnesota, Café Royale, Carvers, Rosewood Room, or Festival.

Radisson Plaza's Festival earned its name for culinary finesse, but, as Bob Dylan told 'em, time to get with the program. Deformalize your operation and the menu, and for God's sake, make it impulse-friendly. Put it on the street!

Welcome to Fire Lake, a lesson in changing with the times. On the basis of a single visit, my thumbs are up. I'd go back. *I will*, in fact.

The food is straight forward, but with touches of imagination and concern for quality - light years better than the route some hotels, in search of customers, have taken: sports bars of coffee-shop cafes.

Fire Lake's servers strut their stuff (and with cute, slacker-meets-steakhouse uniforms to do it in). They know their way around the menu, and are free with good advice.

The room itself, in warm cinnamon tones, is more a workhorse than a diva setting. Best seats are the curvy, faux-leather booths that serve as box seats for the stage performance in the form-meets-function open kitchen.

Fire Lake is under the care of Exec Chef Paul Lynch, former head of the former Festival, who has simplified the menu (do not read: dumbed down), but retained his edge in culinary marriage-making.

Take the starters, for example.

The walleye / scallion / wild rice cakes are perfect. Petite, gently grilled, and moist, they're balanced with a nest of greens and the kitchen's

limpid, lemony, tarragon remoulade (think tarter sauce, but better). And the alder-smoked salmon (two warm and tender trout-sized fillets) proved addictive, flaunting sweetness with an undercut, not knockout blow, of smoke. They're paired with shards of grilled bruschetta and a painting of orange-black pepper aioli - sweet, rich, and citrusy, but with a backup kick-so good, it ought to be patented.

We shared the Minnesota bread salad and still took home a doggie bag, so swell that it served as breakfast.

The greens are tossed with cranberries, unobtrusive wild rice croutons, pears of robustly flavored goat cheese, sweet-smoke bits of bacon, and a melange of chopped tomatoes, cucumbers, onions and corn kernels, under a haze of balsamic vinaigrettes.

(Apps and salads \$4.50-\$10.)

We then could have chosen chicken or pasta, but not with that grill fired up front and center, no sir.

My friend's double-cut, honey-cured, pecan-smoked, bone-on pork chop was a winner. You know how dry and super-smoky they can get? Not this one.

It's suppose to come with maple-glazed yams and apples, but that sounded too saccharine, so we voted for the fingerling potatoes, roasted in sea salt and hers - oh, so mealy. Swirl them through the sour cream at their side, and they're beyond perfect.

My walleye also gave the delicate and tender fish the star treatment it deserves - wood-grilled for a few moments in its gentle crust of (and I quote) Iroquois heirloom roasted corn flour, served aside a drizzle of that princely remoulade.

Bypassing the suggested frites, we tried instead the white cheddar-herb mash, a mountain of comfort potatoes.

Or, should we have summoned the roasted corn on the cob with cumin-lime butter? The wood-grilled asparagus? Next time, next time

Entrées ranges from \$12 to \$26.



Executive Chef Paul Lynch



Wood-grilled walleye

Finishing the last of a California Zin from the balanced, affordable list, we insisted we couldn't manage another morsel, then ordered dessert.

Lynch is back there thinking again, and it shows. A ricotta and pine nut cheesecake, lighter than the Jewish deli kind, proved pure, satiny indulgence. (And if I fail to mention the mountain whipped cram atop it, it won't stick to my hips.)

A crème caramel, on the lighter side of richness, was partnered with poached pears, wonderfully refreshing, and peppery tuile. Nice.

The restaurant's concept has legs, and the execution is there, too. Fire Lake makes a nice addition to the downtown scene. LAVENDER

Fire Lake Grill House & Cocktail Bar
31 S. 7th St., Mpls.
(612) 216-3473 (FIRE)
www.firelakerestaurant.com