

Fleur de Sel with a Grain of Salt?

Jennifer Contreras

Welcome to Dining Room Operations. All semester long you will be asked to exemplify professionalism. You will be expected to raise the bar, your standards, and push aside any “me-first” attitude that, so often, wrongly appears in many service-oriented businesses. Your classroom will consist of napkins and wine glasses, entrée forks and knives. Of course you will think “good” service can be explained through the tired cliché: the guest is always right, but you will soon learn this is more than just a convenient line to mutter whenever a McDonald’s cashier sasses you, or the Domino’s pizza delivery man takes more than thirty minutes to deliver. After all, what does “good” even mean? You are guaranteed to be tested and tried, forced out of any comfort zone you have. In order to become a successful hospitality *professional*, you will be introduced to new tastes and experiences, and for those who want it, the chance at honing your service skills.

Personally, a fine dining experience was something I had never had prior to the Dining Room Operations class, let alone something I cared to provide for others. Undoubtedly, I understood the connection between service and the hospitality industry, but I thought fine dining was only for those that could afford it. The characteristics of fine dining seemed to go beyond excellent service and focus on excluding underprivileged members of society. This notion seemed to go against my definition of service. I struggled to accept that fine dining was something more than pampering the self-important and self-indulged. But, in order to make any fair judgments on fine dining, I knew I had to have a fine dining experience of my own. Of course, since having this experience was part of a required class project, and worth a large portion of my overall grade, I warmed up to the notion rather quickly.

Fleur de Sel, located in the Flatiron District of Manhattan, posed a terrific option where I could conduct a thorough evaluation and discover for myself what fine dining was all about. The restaurant specializes in French cuisine from the Northwest of France, a region known as Brittany. This area is not only the birthplace of executive Chef Cyril Renaud, but of the beloved sea salt for which the restaurant is named. Fleur de Sel operates under Chef Cyril Renaud, whose previous successes have been with two other French restaurants in Manhattan, Bouley and La Caravelle. Desserts are created by pastry chef Devin McDavid. Fleur de Sel has received numerous accolades for the sensation it has become, yet I wondered whether I would enjoy the experience provided me as much as the reviews seemed to promise.

The moment of truth began before I arrived at the establishment, when I was greeted warmly over the telephone by a courteous male who gave me the impression that I had called with perfect timing. Then again, I had made every effort to call long before the time of day when staff members are drained from the stressful pace associated with successful restaurants. Still, I remained wary of the experience I would have. Nonetheless, my reservation had been confirmed, and I would find out if Fleur de Sel would be on a par with everything I secretly hoped it to be.

My belief that all fine dining comes with a heavy bill proved to be a fallacy as I researched the lunch options, surprised at the various tasting menus available for reasonable prices. The lunch tasting menu of my choice was just under \$60. The restaurant offered excellent price value, considering the foods that were served and the care that went into making them superb.

The restaurant emitted warmth and was inviting, with hints of femininity. Billowy white curtains, soft lighting and cushioned booths adorned with decorative pillows presented a romantic setting without being too forward. When I entered, the host swiftly removed my coat and sat my guest and me at a corner table in the far end of the restaurant. The seating was prompt, and I appreciated being in a position from where I could easily observe the service and atmosphere. Aware that the restaurant had opened just short of an hour ago, I knew it was still too early for there to be many diners. However, I was impressed with the fact that there was only one front server and one back server, both of whom provided the same smooth flow of service for each of the five tables.

After we were seated for a few minutes, the front server arrived with two menus and discussed with us the different lunch tasting menus of the day. Giving us some time to think, the waiter then started on another table nearby. After careful consideration, my partner and I decided we wanted to order the three-course tasting menu. I chose one in which each plate seemed to balance something different and something I knew I would enjoy. For example, I could imagine what the butternut squash soup would taste and look like, but imagined the truffle oil would change the flavor significantly. And having used bitter greens in class, I wondered how the chef would use those flavors to compliment the chicken liver pâté appetizer. To compliment the three-course tasting menu, I added the wine pairing for an additional price, hoping the wine would enhance the taste experience of each course.

After we ordered, the front server vanished and the back server appeared with two kinds of bread and fresh European butter. The back server offered a choice between rye and sourdough bread. He delicately placed two rustic, crispy rye slices onto my bread and butter plate using tongs instead of the complicated spoon and fork method, and gave the sourdough bread to my guest. The rye bread had a pronounced, almost nutty flavor, and a flaky outside. The sourdough was much lighter and softer with a slightly sour taste. Both were delicious, but I knew I did not want to fill up on bread.

The wines to be paired with the first courses were presented to our table and poured. The server explained the wines, always keeping the label facing both

me and my guest. The wines were already opened because we would only be having a glass, not a whole bottle. The butternut squash soup was paired with a fresh and fruity white wine, Catarratto, Tenuta Rapitalia, Piano Maltese, Sicily, Italy 2007. The chicken liver pâté was paired with a different white wine, Viognier, Echelon, Clarksburg, California 2006. Afterwards the wines were returned to the wine holder located in the center of the dining room. After the wine service, our back server pointed the table for our appetizers, and shortly after, arrived with both appetizers in hand. As I had imagined, the truffle oil brought an appealing earthiness instead of the typical sweetness often associated with this soup. The butternut squash soup was smooth and silky, with bubbles from the white foam garnish that popped on the tongue, adding interest. I was happy to discover that foam would appear in another course I had ordered. My guest's appetizer was a balance of color between the pale pink, molded smooth chicken liver pâté that was served chilled, and the side of bright green frisée and chervil salad, which had its bitter tastes balanced with a truffle vinaigrette. Crispy buttery bread complimented the woody flavors of the salad, and the mellow and rich pâté was beautifully paired with the refreshing wine, which contained hints of lemon.

Again, the back server arrived to remove our plates and pointed our table for the entrées, making sure to crumb the table as well as refilling our water and bread. The front server had poured our wines, and again explained them to us. The floral scented Pinot Noir, Côte de Nuits Village, Domaine Rion, Burgundy, France 2003, would be paired with my order of the pan-seared blue cod with braised cabbage, tomato confit and shallot foam. The crispness of the skin gave texture to the otherwise buttery melt-in-your-mouth, almost sensuous-tasting flesh of the cod. The cod fish lay on a bed of shredded tender cabbage with sweet tomato flavors that balanced with an airy foam, this time having a light onion taste. My guest had his own sensual experience with the braised beef short ribs that had a rich flavor stemming from the earthy wild mushroom garnish, and the beurre noisette sauce which pooled under a fluffy cloud of celeriac purée. The celeriac purée tasted like mashed potatoes, both in texture and flavor, and nicely absorbed much of the rich brown butter sauce.

Satisfied with the first two courses, my partner and I could not fathom what other pleasing surprises the kitchen would deliver. The back server arrived to point the table for dessert, and later, to drop both plates. Slowly, more diners began to enter the restaurant, but the total covers never exceeded a dozen. When the desserts arrived, the back server switched the orders, and my partner and I had to exchange plates with one another. This small mix up, of course, was easily forgivable. The apple gratin was composed of tart apple slices with a crunchy top layer and a mound of refreshing green apple sorbet, which tasted more like ice cream. It was accompanied by a dessert wine, Suaternes, Castelnau de Suduiraut, Bordeaux, France 2001. My guest ordered the assorted sorbets on top of a light, crisp meringue. The meringue added texture to the various creamy fruit sorbets that included raspberry, grapefruit, and lemon flavors; and the dessert was paired with Noble Blend, Lilly Pilly, NSW, Australia 2006. Both desserts had balance of

color, and were slightly larger portions than the previous courses. In addition, I felt that the desserts were understated, having a simple yet elegant plate design.

As “Wild Horses” by The Sundays played softly, I could not help but observe the connection between the dessert and the feel of the restaurant. The serene, comfortable elegance and unobtrusive service were easy to overlook. But, when paying close enough attention, I could see the magic of it all.

In retrospect, I was so pleased with the meal that for a brief moment, all seemed to be right with the world, and I gained a deep appreciation for the privilege given to me to dine and have this experience. I refuse to look at fine dining restaurants the same way I did before I dined at Fleur de Sel. I realize I could possibly have had a different experience at this same restaurant, at a different time, with different servers, food, or prices. Furthermore, I understand the importance of researching a restaurant before dining in order to have the right expectations. I also learned that fine dining does require something of us, as guests, but in return can offer something great. We are asked to make reservations, to dress according to the dress code, to savor, not devour, to sip, not slurp. But this does not mean that guests cannot feel comfortable or relaxed. Dining at Fleur de Sel proved to me that while all fine dining restaurants may not be the same, new experiences should be given a chance before we form an opinion of them, and lessons aren't just learned in a classroom.

Nominating faculty: Professor Karen Goodland, Hospitality Management 2305, Department of Hospitality Management, School of Professional Studies, New York City College of Technology, CUNY.

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