

THE DENVER POST

Review: Fruition

A bright new classic

By Tucker Shaw

Denver Post Dining Critic

Article Last Updated: 03/14/2007 10:34:31 AM MDT

Maitre d' Paul Attardi, front, and Chef Alex Seidel brought their experience to Fruition. (The Denver Post)

Make no mistake: It's much too early to review Fruition, a tiny new neighborhood bistro on East Sixth Avenue.

After all, it's only fair to give a new restaurant time and experience to find its bearings, smooth out its rough edges and get its act together.

But immediately after my first visit, it was clear that the nascently brilliant Fruition needed no courtesy wait-time. Their act *WAS* together.

That first meal left me giddy, lovestruck, hungry. I couldn't stop thinking about it - or talking about it. I even tried to avoid visiting it again too soon, because I was afraid I might not like it as much. After all, it's on the second date when you begin to see flaws.

But I was smitten. So I went again.

And again.

Finally, my editor, likely tired of listening to my excessive enthusiasm about the place, waved me out of his office, saying, "It would be a disservice to our readers to withhold this."

And so, with feigned reluctance, I agreed to write about Fruition, the brainchild of chef Alex Seidel and maitre d' Paul Attardi, and my new favorite restaurant.

In the month-plus it's been open, I've had everything on Fruition's menu at least once, in varying combinations and with various dining companions. Almost without fail every single dish has been very, very, very good.

But besides that, I believe that Fruition represents a significant, if subtle, shift in contemporary cooking.

Some background: Food, like art and music and fashion, goes through pendulum swings. Over the last 20 years, high-end American neighborhood cooking has swung from starched and saucy urban stuffiness to accessible Italian-country-inspired rusticity, sending classic peasant food to the head of the table and knocking more formal, strictly codified, mostly French-rooted dishes off the menu.

That pendulum has hit its apex. The days of "yank it out of the garden and

Pasta Carbonara with braised pork belly (The Denver Post)
toss it on the table with some salt" are waning. There is a newfound appreciation among contemporary diners for highly skilled, meticulous, detail-driven cooking.

Will the pendulum fall back to the '80s, when fussy-fancy nouvelle fusion alternately wowed and befuddled the hungry proletariat? No. Because now that we, as an eating culture, have rediscovered the soulful deliciousness of traditional farmhouse fare its well-grown, carefully-stewarded ingredients, we're unwilling to let go of it. It's too good.

Instead, the pendulum swings into new(ish) territory, where precise, exacting cooking techniques meet accessible, comforting, familiar flavors.

It swings toward Fruition - steadfastly traditional in its

Chicken noodle soup with winter vegetables (The Denver Post)
soulfulness, strictly classic in its execution, thoroughly modern in its outlook.

Officially, Fruition specializes in comfort food. But this is elegant, refined comfort food. Every plate carries evidence of strict discipline in the kitchen, of not just the artistry but the nuts-and-bolts *craft* of cooking.

Take, for instance, the chicken noodle soup. It's perhaps the simplest dish on the menu, described as "Chicken noodle soup: Herb roasted chicken, casarecce pasta, winter vegetables."

And yet, the description on the menu sells it short. This is not an easy, effortless dish. This soup took work.

The broth-a rich, supple, clear potage that, strained onto a spoon and taken alone, was a

Lemon sole with Jerusalem artichokes (The Denver Post)
familiar but intricate folk dance of protein and garlic and vegetables and wine. The chicken - supple chunks of white and dark meat. The pasta - hand-formed trumpets of fresh al-dente casarecce pasta. And the vegetables - carrots, turnips, celery painstakingly clipped into perfect, tiny brunoise (miniature cubes) that bounced across my tongue like winning dice on a craps table.

This wasn't a kitchen-sink chicken soup. This was a carefully created, extravagantly detailed bowl of culinary elegance that just happened to taste like Grandma made it. It reminded me of Jean-George Vongerichten's pristine version at his acclaimed Perry Street restaurant in New York, only homier.

In other words, a nearly perfect example of the

Potato-wrapped oysters Rockefeller, one of Fruition's signature appetizers. (The Denver Post)
marriage of formal and casual that Fruition represents.

Other items on the short, smart, easy-reading menu follow the same tack. The understated Fruition salad, nothing more than watercress, avocado, asparagus, and crispy fried shallots, was assembled with a light, dextrous hand, and unlike all but three other salads I've ever eaten (two of which were at Alice Waters' Chez Panisse in Berkeley, Calif.), was perfectly, lightly dressed with a lively, tangy spritz.

Simple seared tuna with a caper tapenade felt like a lazy swim in warm Mediterranean waters. Pasta carbonara constructed from a platform of cavatelli and a layer of playing-card-sized squares of melty house-cured pork belly. Delicate goat cheese fritters tumbled across earthy, lingerie-thin roasted beet carpaccio.

Butter-poached salmon with beet spaetzle burst off the plate in a riot of color belying the soothing texture of the salmon - salmon that, not for nothing, tasted mightily of salmon. The spaetzle, a tough item to pull off in any kitchen, could have been more uniform in texture, but it did nothing to detract from the fish.

Delicate, buttery cider-brined pork shoulder confit floated on an airy braised fennel purée. Crisp-skinned duck breast sat on a pond of earthy- but-erudite risotto. Braised veal cheeks melted into a soft, spoonable dish studded with pearl onions and fontina-laced polenta. Lemon sole, kissed-not-drowned with a hollandaise barely touched by truffle, came accessorized with bitter-good baby Jerusalem artichokes.

And the vanilla bean pudding, delicate and flavorful, and washed down with a glass of Muscat, murmured a silky good-night lullaby. (Approach the Devil's Food Cake with care; it's rich and chocolatey, but much too sweet.)

Fruition's menu is set to change with the seasons, so watch for signs of spring around the first of April.

The wine list at Fruition, like the restaurant itself, is in its early days, and will need attention and refinement as it ages. It is short, well-edited, and (mostly) fairly priced, but it doesn't have the focus or personality of our area's best wine collections, like the exemplary list at Frasca Food & Wine in Boulder. In time, I'm confident that Fruition's list will evolve to include more inspiring juice and more creative pairings.

One wine-service quibble: In my perfect world, when I order a wine by the glass, my server will bring the bottle to the table so I can check it out while I take my first sip. With wine, like with people, I like a face with the name, and I want to see the bottle; I didn't get to at Fruition.

Fruition's room is cozy and intimate, quietly lit and decorated with lovely botanical watercolors. Chairs are comfortable, tables are spacious.

But it's a small space, and it lacks a coherent flow from the kitchen through the room and back. Servers charged with delivering food struggle with the too-crowded layout, and need easier access to all corners of the dining room. Eventually, when the kinks are straightened and the service finds its stride, Fruition will likely need more staff, and may have to reconfigure the space to accommodate them.

Nothing a restaurant backed by this kind of talent and clarity of vision can't solve, and soon.

I believe that Fruition, although a small neighborhood restaurant, is, whether it knows it or not, an important, unique, exemplary and potentially profound addition to our city's culinary culture. Perfect? Not yet. But it's on the fast track.

Bravo, gentlemen.

Dining critic Tucker Shaw can be reached at 303-954-1958 or at dining@denverpost.com.

"We wanted the name to mean something," says Fruition's chef-owner Alex Seidel. "I got into this business when I was 14, dishwashing. I'm 33 now, so that's over half my lifetime. Paul (partner Paul Attardi) and I have traveled and studied and worked, and it's all kind of paid off and opened the door. With this restaurant, it's all coming to fruition."

The menu reflects Seidel's personal point of view - that of a Wisconsin-bred boy with German roots who has cooked his way through a decade's-worth of white-tablecloth restaurants across the country, and whose wife gave birth to their first son last November.

"That's me on the menu," he says. "Back to basics. Approachable food. Flavor combinations that people understand and love."

But, he says, "absolutely everything has to be done properly - blanching, shocking, braising, roasting, curing. It could be nothing but a salad of tomatoes and basil, but the technique has to be there."

Seidel appears to know exactly how to manage a kitchen and extract that level of technique from his staff, thanks in no small part to a long stretch in the kitchen at Frank Bonanno's standard-setting Mizuna restaurant.

But after 4 1/2 years at Mizuna, he says, "it was time to spread the wings. I built a lot of relationships there, and walked away with a lot of good friendships. It was like a close-knit family there, and that's something we're trying to re-create here."

Like Bonanno, Seidel takes pains to teach and mentor his kitchen staff. "When we braise pork belly \, we check it together every hour and talk about how it's changing, what it looks like, what it's *supposed* to look like."

The experience at Mizuna also guaranteed Seidel and Attardi access to some of the foodiest customers in the city, but Seidel says the vision for Fruition wasn't to impress or cater to the food elite.

"We were shooting to be known as a neighborhood restaurant," he says. "And I think it's working, you know?"