

November 3rd, 2004 – Soigné - Omakase Menu

First Course

Jumbo Day Scallop and Ahi Tuna Tartare
Topped with Wasabi Crème Fraiche and American Osetra Caviar
On a bed of Crispy Pomme Frites, garnished with scallions
Matching Wine: Pinot Blanc, Trimbach, 2001, France

Second Course

Seared Jumbo Day Scallop Tataki Style
Topped with Tarragon Aioli, Watercress and Black Truffle Slices
Served on Charred Indian Nan Bread
Matching Wine: Ama No To, NV, Japan

Third Course

Seared Jumbo Day Scallops and Rock Shrimp Risotto with Adachi Butter
Matching Wine: Albarino, Viouta, 2003, Spain

Fourth Course

Sautéed Jumbo Day Scallop and Pan Seared Hudson Valley Foie Gras
Topped with Preserved Black Truffles
Saki-Demi Reduction and Port Syrup
Matching Wine: Moscatel Blend, Torres Vina Esmeralda, 2003, Spain

Fifth Course

An assortment of artisan cheeses served with toasted French Bread Points
Spanish Cows Milk Cheese
Italian Sheep Cheese
Italian Goat Cheese
Italian Hybrid Goat and Sheep Cheese
Topped with Blackberries, Raspberries and Apples
Surrounded by a Port Wine and Molasses Reduction
Matching Wine: Port

Soigné

554 E. Fort Avenue

Baltimore, MD 21230

(410) 659-9898

Cost: \$ 75 (w/wine tasting add \$10)

Review of Soigné
November 3, 2004

I don't like scallops. Let me repeat that, I don't like scallops. I don't order them. I don't buy them. I don't eat them. Why? Not sure, something about the texture, the preparation, the taste, I'm just not sure. Yes, I have tried them and have never been a fan. Now, let me tell about our recent outing to Soigné.

Our last meal out was for French, at a great fun little Bistro. We took a group vote and decided upon Soigné. One reason was that everyone felt that the Asian / Mediterranean menu would be a nice change. Another draw at Soigné was that Chef Kim would do an Omakase menu for us.

Chef Kim used to offer an Omakase as a regular offering but had recently dropped it. I am not sure why and forgot to ask why, but I suspect that it was either a lack of interest or understanding. However, when I heard he had offered it before, I contacted him directly and he exclaimed he would love to offer it to us and sounded very excited that we were interested in it.

Let me explain exactly what an Omakase is. When we head out to eat, we normally have the Chef select us a tasting menu from existing items on their menu. At times there may be off-menu items also offered. An Omakase is slightly different. The definition of "Omakase" comes from the verb "makasu" which means to trust, to let someone else take the initiative. In general, "Omakase" expresses the idea of having the courage to place your life in the hands of someone else. Or, in the case of dining ...place your dining experience in the hands of a chef.

A true chefs "Omakase" menu should reflect the chef's vision of the following;

- Flavor - distinct or combination of sweet, tart, bland, salty, spicy and sour
- Color - contrasting and attractive combinations
- Texture - distinct or combination of crisp, soft, chewy, and firm
- Shapes & Size - mix of flat, round, long, chopped, shredded, heaped, tubular, etc
- Temperature - hot, cold, tepid, lukewarm, even icy

Some chefs will even push the envelope further and prepare a single item omakase. In other words, the main ingredient will be featured in all of the courses. Unbeknownst to us, this is exactly what Chef Kim had in mind.

Three of us had arrived early and had a cocktail while we waited for our fourth to join us. The dinner was thrown together on very short notice, thus the small group. Soigné is located down in Federal Hill, or almost Locust Point, a prototypical South Baltimore Blue-Collar neighborhood. However, don't let the slightly gruff exterior deter you. Upon entry you will be more than amply rewarded.

The space is drawn with very crisp, clean lines, sleek almost. Beneath the surface is a quiet effervescence, an air of sophistication, yet a homey and comfortable feel. The candle lit bar and, we would see shortly, a somewhat sparsely, but well decorated dining area make you feel like an old friend in familiar surroundings.

The wait staff are dressed in chic black, while their personalities are friendly, warm and inviting. The colors of white and blacks are used extensively, but to good effect. I'm not an interior designer, nor do I watch *Queer Eye*, so please excuse my lack of descriptive skills here. What I do know is that they have a very nice little bar at the front and they serve my favorite vodka, always a good start to a great evening. Most importantly, this was our first time there, and we were treated and made to feel like we were long time regulars.

Just as our drinks arrived, so did our fourth. She ordered a very dirty martini. The only reason I mentioned this is that, at the bar, they have something like a "garnish it yourself" martini station. There are bamboo skewers available and various assortments of olives and other garnishes, a very nice little touch.

We were then led to dining room and our table. The dining area is just past the bar. Again, very simply decorated, but very elegantly. I tend to notice little things, nit sure why, but I do. Part of the table setting included place mats of course. These were made of bamboo, very similar in size and presentation to the bamboo mats sushi chefs use to make rolls. Another neat little touch.

The waitress knew we were having the omakase, so menus were not offered, but she did ask us if we wanted to do matching wines with the omakase. Throwing caution to the winds, we said sure. Before she left, she told us that Chef was very excited about the omakase this evening and that there would be a single theme ingredient, scallops.

Well I looked at the person sitting next to me, he looked back, silently acknowledging that he was not a scallop fan either, but we decided to go along. Why not? We'd come this far; let's see what Chef could do with this bivalve mollusk that neither of us liked. We were at this point very happy we had also ordered the matching wines.

OK, first course, Jumbo Day Scallop and Ahi Tuna Tartare, topped with Wasabi Crème Fraiche and Osetra Caviar. This was presented with some crispy pommes frites and scallions for garnish. This was matched with a Pinot Blanc from the Trimbach region.

Now, remember my first paragraph, my first sentence, the very first words in this review, I don't like scallops. Well, Chef Kim might just change my mind. This was an incredible presentation was just as an incredible taste to match. The

scallop matched with the Tuna in the Tartare perfectly. The pomme frites gave it a bit of crispiness and the wine was perfect with it. I liked this. Actually I liked this very much, but I don't like scallops, or do I?

Next came the same Jumbo Day scallop (Remember? This is a single item menu this evening), this time seared Tataki style. Tataki style means that the scallop is seared on the outside for a chewy crust and raw on the inside. This was topped with a tarragon aioli, watercress and slices of preserved black truffles. This time the matching wine was a very fine, as the server put it, non-vintage Sake. WOW. The crispy exterior, the sushi like interior, the tang of the aioli, the earthiness of the truffles and then this velvety sake. My taste buds were having an out of the body experience. This was a scallop? Incredible.

Third course came and with it what I thought was the hit of the evening. Seared Day Scallops and Rock Shrimp Risotto with Dashi Butter. (Note: Dashi is a fish and seaweed stock base used in Japanese soups and sauces). The wine with this time was a Spanish Albarino Viouta. I love Italian and this was a step beyond because of the addition of the Dashi Butter. The scallops were soft, buttery. The rock shrimp had a bit more consistency, but their own unique flavor. These two, matched with the risotto and this incredible dashi butter. The wine just coating my taste buds with it's own earthy flavor. I was in heaven.

About this time I was (1) In heaven, but also (2) wanting some red meat. Chef Kim did not fail. The fourth course was a Jumbo Day Scallop, this time sautéed and matched with Pan Seared Hudson Valley Foie Gras. This was topped with sliced black truffles and presented with a Saki Demi reduction and port syrup. Incredibly rich and decadent and it felt almost like red meat. This was matched with a Spanish Moscatel Blend, Torres Vina Esmeralda. If I didn't have that sweet feeling of decadence and over indulgence, I did now. This was the perfect "big ending" as it was. The lightness of the scallop, the richness of the Foie Gras, again the earthiness and texture of the truffles, and then the sauce. Also, don't let me forget about the Moscatel. Yes, Moscatel and another perfect match. Remember, I don't like scallops. Or rather, in a previous life I didn't like scallops. I refer to that time period as B.C., Before Chef. Thanks to Chef, I may very find myself ordering scallops sometime in the future. Though, I must admit, I might be just a bit jaded after this experience.

However, before I close this review, I was wondering how Chef Kim would close the meal. He did so simply and elegantly. Desert was an assortment of artisan cheeses served with toasted bread points. The cheeses, of which there were Cow's, Sheep and Goat Cheese, were topped with Blackberries, Raspberries and thin apples slices. This was all surrounded by a simple, yet elegant Port Wine and Molasses reduction. There was no matching with this, just an excellent Cappuccino. The perfect ending to a great meal, light, airy, almost a cleansing effect on the palate.

Soigné and Chef Kim should not be missed. The experience we had was fun, memorable, loud and enjoyed by all. The service was excellent and the food incredible and eye opening. If you had told me that one meal could change my complete way of thinking about an ingredient, I would have told you, you were nuts. Well Chef Kim has a believer in me.

Soigné provided an outstanding dining experience and I strongly recommend that you venture the drive down Charles or Light Street, all the way past the Cross Street Market, and make the left turn onto Fort Avenue. Here you'll find a hidden delight in Soigné, a small sophisticated restaurant and bar, that although located in a small, simple part of Baltimore could easily compare with any fine restaurant in Washington DC or even Manhattan.

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