

Max & David's

Robin and Steven Katz's restaurant in Elkins Park takes kosher cooking to places that few others have gone.

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Posted Sunday, January 27, 2008

My sister-in-law, Patty, glanced up from the menu at Max & David's with a rebellious look and laid down this commandment with unexpected *umph*.

"I am *not* going to get the fish!"

The pronouncement took me by surprise, at first. Over the dozen or so review meals we've shared over the years, she had dutifully tiptoed across menus strewn with land mines for a kosher eater. With all pork, shellfish, and dishes mixing dairy with meat (let alone any nonkosher meat) crossed off her list, she inevitably settled on fish or veggies. It seemed a reasonably flexible approach, given that even stricter kosher Jews probably wouldn't have come out to eat with me at all. But for some reason, I'd come to believe she actually just *liked* fish.

That was until I saw her eyes widen at the sight of Max & David's rib eye. And, lo, this wasn't just any rabbinically approved steak. This was a Let-There-Be-Meat! slice of flesh, a grilled bone-in slab of such biblical proportions that this Turkish-spiced chop perfumed the entire table with its savor when it landed.

Thick and tender, seasoned with an exotic Baharat rub of cumin, cinnamon, and clove, this beef was splendid by any standard. But considering it was glatt kosher - meeting the strictest standard of Jewish dietary laws - I can see why this contemporary eatery by Robin and Steven Katz has become the talk of Elkins Park since it opened in a new strip mall in October.

The other kosher options around Philadelphia are truly dismal and few, with the exception of casual Israeli falafel and shawarma shops, like those operated under the Mama's name. Only four restaurants in the entire region are approved by the orthodox rabbinate to serve meat. (A few more are acceptable to the less restrictive conservative supervisors).

But Max & David's is more than just a mensch amongst unmensch-ionables. With a menu that ranges from five-spice roasted duck to Indian-currried chicken and ice "creams" made with coconut and almond milk, it is a coming-out party for the possibilities of kosher cookery.

The kitchen isn't always successful (I could kvetch about the industrial rolls, the limp fries, the overly icy sorbets, and more). The awkward service staff still needs polish, and the bare Formica tabletops make this dining room feel too much like a gussied-up hotel coffee shop for a place charging \$23-plus an entree.

And yet, given the weak competition of any sort in Philly's northern burbs, this restaurant is bound to draw attention from beyond the observant Jewish community. It already has, judging from the mainstream crowds I saw scattered amongst the orthodox black coats fringed with white tallit prayer shawls.

"Well, we have the cleanest vegetables in the Delaware Valley!" quips Steven, who energetically bounds between banquettes in this copper-toned dining room with more oneliners than a Borscht Belt comic. Did you hear the one about the pastrami burger?

"It comes with a cardiologist!"

He isn't joking, though, about the vegetables. As a requirement for glatt certification, an everpresent kosher supervisor (a "mashgiach" or "mashgicha") inspects each lettuce leaf and vegetable over a light box with a

magnifying glass for bugs, then washes them three times. It's a process that takes up to four hours each day, but is just one of the myriad daily routines required to meet the standards of the local orthodox rabbis.

The most challenging task, according to consulting chef Aliza Green, who conceived most of this menu, was simply finding the range of quality ingredients needed to present kosher food in a creative fine-dining setting, from pomegranate molasses to decent ducks. With the significantly higher cost of kosher meat, the margin for error is slim.

Some of these dishes, like the thin and bony lamb shoulder chops, are hardly worth \$23 (and why serve summery panzanella salad in January?). I love the notion of Jewish barbecue, but my portion of house-smoked brisket was so puny I winced at the \$22 fee.

For the most part, though, executive chef Jared Cohen, 29, a Wyncote native trained in California who most recently worked at Tangerine, does a solid job executing a menu that knows few borders.

The Turkish lamb meatballs are a highlight, simmered in a cinnamon-scented tomato gravy that evokes a Sephardic Mediterranean mood. Latin ideas spice up a hearty Southwestern chicken tortilla soup, as well as the chipotle mayonnaise for Max & David's addictive onion rings.

The restaurant's smoker adds a musky edge to vegetable salsa served with the lime-splashed crunch of jicama and pumpkin-seed salad. But its best use may be for the house-cured pastrami, whose deeply smoky tang atop the burger convinced my Israeli pal, Ofer, that he was eating the next best thing to a Wendy's "Baconator." (It was, in fact, far better.)

The kitchen has mixed luck with Asian fusion, hitting a winner with a tuna sushi roll wrapped in a crisp panko crust, but missing on a greasy duck spring roll. The orange-glazed five-spiced duck was far better, superbly tender over soft polenta infused with orange zest.

Max & David's works so hard to avoid the old deli clichés, I wonder why it bothers to serve such an ordinary scoop of pasty chopped liver, made from the pre-broiled livers required by the kosher law. Yet, a zaftig slice of homey veal breast - rolled around a stuffing of rice, Swiss chard and mushrooms - and slowly braised, is a welcome reminder that the Eastern European Jewish tradition still has plenty of treasures to mine.

And, yes, there is fish, too, a branzino (not "bronzino") served with roasted-pepper romesco sauce (not "Romanesco"). Spelling mistakes aside, the crisply seared sea bass over apricot rice was really quite good. But few in this crowd, already over-fished in the wider world and in the throes of a carnivorous kosher carnival, will ever know.

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