



All Over the Map

Discovering hits and misses at a new West End eatery

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**** (out of four)**

Some restaurants start out with a silver spoon in their mouths -- did anyone *really* expect Central Michel Richard to be a flop? -- and some restaurants are born staring at uphill climbs.

A prime example of the latter is the new Hudson Restaurant & Lounge. Its address has been home to at least three dining rooms in the past seven years (most recently David Gregory), and its chef, selected just weeks before launch, was an unknown commodity whose last professional gig had him whipping up food for British Airways. While I've been a longtime admirer of Hudson's owner -- the indefatigable Alan Popovsky, who jazzed up Adams Morgan with Felix for eight or so years and nurtured a string of successful chefs there -- his latest project sounded like a gamble.

Then I encountered the risotto at Hudson, which is named for 17th-century explorer Henry Hudson. The appetizer was creamy and luscious, each grain swollen with stock yet firm to the touch. Mushrooms and cheese weighed in with their charms, making for a dish that could easily have starred in a high-end Italian restaurant and that arrived as a heaping "half-portion" for \$12.

Another meal, another lure: matzo ball soup, its delicate, dill-flecked broth supporting lovely bites of carrot, celery, chicken, and a dumpling with all the lightness of a souffle. "Very momlike," a dining companion observed as he hovered over the soup. "Prettier than any mother would make," the experienced food maven at my table added.

Every bit as memorable that night was a plate of crackling buttermilk fried chicken, arranged on mashed potatoes whose richness suggested aligot, the elastic and glorious whip of potatoes, cheese and garlic

found in France's Auvergne region.

Not every dish soars as high as those examples do, not by a long shot. But Hudson has assets beyond food to recommend it.

One of them is strong service. Popovsky, a seemingly ever-present owner, has brought together a great team of managers and servers to cosset the crowds -- and this at a time when even deep-pocket restaurants have trouble finding and keeping talent. As a graduate student in the 1980s, Popovsky worked in a variety of jobs at the Four Seasons in Washington, where he says he learned, among other things, that "empowering people" was one of the smartest things a manager can do. At Hudson, the smiles seem sincere, and they're backed by waiters who know the menu and seem to understand just what you need at just the right moment.

A second attraction is the space. Smack on a busy corner in the West End, the window-wrapped, pink-hued restaurant is one of those places you can rely on for a quick drink, a date, dinner with the tribe or a late-night snack. To avoid the noise of a private party congregating around the bar one night, pals and I sought refuge in the rear, set off by raspberry-colored walls and lovely photographs of cherry blossoms. Our table looked right into the kitchen, where we got to see chef Kyle Schroeder, 34, in motion.

Stay away from the salt shaker! I wanted to caution the chef as I sampled his beef brisket, a composition worthy of a spread in a food magazine but undermined by its abundance of sodium.

Hudson's menu is a mix of homey food and upscale designs. While the hamburger is juicy and nicely seasoned, the cheese steak sliders -- bland shaved rib-eye and melted cheese on dense and tasteless buns -- return to the kitchen barely touched. Supersize crab cakes are bulked up with too many panko crumbs, and a veal chop has more problems than Britney Spears. It's dull, overcooked and served with pellets of fried gnocchi that are a waste of space in the stomach.

The streets of Washington are lined with pizza these days, and this kitchen bakes a pie that is perfectly respectable -- thin of crust, nicely browned and scattered with decent toppings. Good but not great, that pizza has a lot of company on the menu, conceived, Popovsky says, as a collection of "everyone's favorites." So, *of course*, there are deviled eggs, and they're delicious. As are the herbed french fries, presented in a cone that you wish was bottomless.

I admire the wine list for its focus, range and descriptions that don't go all flowery. There are plenty of appealing (and California-focused) labels; among them are a chenin blanc-viognier blend from Pine Ridge, a syrah from Lane Tanner and a zinfandel from Neyers. And the bargain-seeker will be pleased to see plenty of interesting choices for \$40 or less.

The biggest problem here is not being able to forecast what, or where, the problems might be. Calamari is big tender pieces of squid with a chili-spiked batter that just clings to the seafood, which is prettily tucked into the folds of a napkin. As common as fried squid is on menus, this version encourages you to

dig deep into its basket. While whole branzino looks the part of a nice piece of fish, the creature is cooked to death; a side of woody asparagus only underscores the disappointment. (And even that risotto can change, but only if you make it: In a telephone exchange, Schroeder told me he sometimes alters the recipe -- intentionally if not happily -- by overcooking the grains for people who request a mushier risotto. Whatever you do, order the dish his way.)

Desserts are of the fun, familiar American variety. Picture apple pie spritzed with whipped cream at the table; ordinary bread pudding, which tastes like an excuse to use up the restaurant's leftover Parker House rolls; a root beer float, thoughtfully served with straws for everyone at the table (floats being like french fries, it's hard not to sneak sips or bites from whoever orders them). A diner gets some dessert even if he doesn't order it, and for me, the free pink-like-the-restaurant popcorn that shows up at meal's end is all the sweet I want.

I feel about restaurants the way I do about cookbooks: If I can find two or three things I like, the price is generally worth it. In the case of Hudson, a rousing risotto, a memorable matzo ball soup and first-rate fried chicken have me looking the other way while the restaurant forges ahead.

British Airways's loss just might be the West End's gain.