



The excitement's on the plate.

An heirloom carrot salad celebrates the humble root vegetable.

Mona Reeder/Staff Photographer

At the Pyramid, André Natera's inspired cooking takes center stage

By **LESLIE BRENNER**
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Twenty years ago in New York, for a profile I was writing of David Bouley, one of that city's most revered chefs, I got to spend some time in the kitchen of his restaurant, Bouley. I watched as the chef passed from station to station inspecting the work his line cooks were performing. One cook was meticulously coaxing the skin off a tomato. Bouley stopped before him, displeased. "You're not *talking* to the tomato," he said.

I'm pretty sure André Natera, executive chef at the Pyramid Restaurant, talks to his tomatoes — and to his beets and carrots and scallops and duck and lamb. Otherwise, how would he know so surely and well what each ingredient

wants, and how to let each express its essence?

Natera's baby-beet salad is a case in point. With flavor that's at once intense and gentle, halved, perfectly cooked golden and red baby beets anchor a plate that's like a painting. A stripe of beet purée heightened with a dash of balsamic vinegar and strips of shaved raw beet show the other flavors a beet can express. Bits of firm local blue cheese add just the right sharp, rich counterpoint; toasted hazelnuts add earthy crunch.

How to celebrate the humble carrot? Natera tosses ribbons of orange and yellow heirloom varieties with a lovely tangle of frisée and arugula in a pitch-perfect roasted-onion vinaigrette and strews fried

capers about the plate. Nestled next to the salad, a quartet of adorable sushilike rolls swap shaved carrot for seaweed and fresh, local goat cheese for rice. Clever, unusual, pretty and delicious, the salad makes a wonderful starter.

So does a dish of fragile gyoza wrappers filled with foie gras; they're steamed and set in a bit of gingery chicken broth scented with lemon grass, Thai basil and cilantro. Bite into one, and you get a voluptuous explosion of flavor. The Asian accent of the sauce is completely unexpected with the foie, and sort of brilliant.

I love the texture of a briquette of sweetbreads set atop a ragout of maitake, beech and shiitake mushrooms with

milk-poached salsify and fried Brussels sprouts petals. Crisp on the outside, soft on the inside, the sweetbreads have lovely, delicate flavor.

Simple yet eloquent is a pumpkin bisque with bits of Spanish chorizo and a swirl of smoked olive oil.

Natera's dishes show utmost respect for their top-notch ingredients, some of which come from the hotel's spectacular roof garden.

When I reviewed the Pyramid about a year and a half ago, after Natera had been in charge of the Fairmont Dallas hotel's kitchens for four months, I noted that his main courses were less interesting and original than his often-impressive starters.

There's been a remarkable evolution. Natera's dishes now change more with the seasons, and this fall, his main courses have often wowed as much as the starters, from a roasted cod dabbled with deep-flavored tomato marmalade in a perfect *beurre blanc* with capers to rosy slices of tender duck breast crusted with peanuts, set on udon noodles in a rich *pho* broth.

Steak lovers will love the Niman Ranch bone-in rib-eye. Beautifully grilled, it's finished with a smear of red-wine butter, garnished with roasted wild mushrooms, set on a chive-flecked potato purée and sauced with a red-wine reduction. The flavor of the meat is superb.

The chef's sauces are always terrific, such as a profoundly elegant demi-glace that graces beautifully roasted lamb loin.

There have been a few off notes here and there: a roast half-chicken whose outstanding flavor deserved crisper skin; a lamb loin that would have paired better with a ravioli filled with something more vivid than braised lamb shoulder.

Still, Natera's cooking is some of the finest and most accomplished in town.

Sommelier Hunter Hammett is a champion of Texas wines, and his list is one of Dallas' most compelling. I was excited to find a 2010 vermentino from Duchman Family Winery's Bingham Family Vineyard — crisp, bright and lively — available by the glass for a reasonable \$9. (It could have been served a wee bit cooler, though.) I also loved a 2009 Sandstone Cellars Touriga VII from Mason County.

But Hammett is also infectiously excited



ANDRÉ NATERA

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Pastry chef Maggie Huff's coconut panna cotta with cardamom cherries and pistachios



Photos by Mona Reeder/Staff Photographer



The Pyramid's decor doesn't exactly dazzle.

about wines from elsewhere, and his list offers unusual finds, like a 2008 Gorrondon Bizkaiko Txakolina, a Basque Country red that's herbal, earthy, minerally and wonderfully odd. He's got a talent for homing in on a diner's particular taste and interests, and making appropriate recommendations.

Unfortunately, if he's out of the restaurant, as he was one Saturday night, there's no one who can explain the wines. I'm glad the servers don't pretend to know the list, but it's really too bad that a restaurant with a selection this good doesn't have a backup. The management should give the servers, who are otherwise excellent — attentive, knowledgeable and enthusiastic about Natera's dishes — some wine training.

Last March, the Pyramid brought in a new pastry chef, Maggie Huff, and she's doing outstanding work. Last summer, she did a plum tart with a beautiful almond

crust, and a terrific coconut panna cotta with cardamom-kissed roasted cherries and crushed pistachios. Lately I've loved her chocolate-peanut butter marquis with a layer of something crisp that made the whole thing remind me of a Butterfinger bar. (Her pine-nut tart, however, suffered on two visits from pine nuts that tasted stale and weren't toasted enough, along with a too-tart-and-icy fig sorbetto.)

If all this talent could be shown off in a vibrant dining room with a modicum of energy, the Pyramid would be one of the most exciting restaurants in town.

Unfortunately, the dining room is deadly dull. Not only does it not convey a sense of occasion; it has "hotel dining room" written all over it. One side is flanked by a buffet room that's vacant at dinnertime, with a view of dormant steam tables. The other side is marginally less depressing.

Never mind. Go there, and focus on the

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The Pyramid Restaurant and Bar

★★★★

Price: \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$ (Breakfast dishes \$7 to \$20, breakfast buffets \$18 to \$24. Brunch dishes \$8 to \$17. Lunch appetizers \$7 to \$8; salads, sandwiches and pastas \$8 to \$12; business lunches \$17 to \$22. Dinner appetizers, soups and salads \$9 to \$13; main courses \$18 to \$36. Desserts and cheese \$8 to \$10.)

Service: Excellent — attentive, well-informed, excited about the cooking. However, the staff could use some training about the wine list.

Ambience: A forlorn dining room that has "hotel" written all over it

Location: The Fairmont hotel, 1717 N. Akard St., Dallas; 214-720-5249; pyramidrestaurant.com

Hours: Breakfast Monday-Friday 6:30 to 11 a.m., Saturday-Sunday 7 to 11 a.m.; lunch daily 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; brunch Sunday 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; dinner daily 6 to 10 p.m.

Credit cards: All major

Wheelchair accessible: Yes

Smoking area: None

Alcohol: Full bar. Sommelier Hunter Hammett's wine list, one of the most interesting in Dallas, features Texas wines and unusual finds from around the world, along with the more expected selections.

RATINGS LEGEND

★★★★.....Extraordinary
 ★★★.....Excellent
 ★★.....Very good
 ★.....Good
 *.....Fair

plates. Have a glass of Texas wine.

And consider this: Wouldn't it be amazing if the hotel's new owner, the Inland American Lodging Group Inc., saw fit to build a splendid new dining room on the roof, with views of the magnificent garden and the Dallas skyline beyond?

It could even be a glass pyramid. I know — easy for me to say. But such a talented team deserves to be shown off to its best advantage.

HAVE YOU BEEN? Tell us whether you agree or disagree with the review. dallasnews.com/restaurants

THE BACK STORY Get a behind-the-scenes peek at what went into reviewing the Pyramid Restaurant and Bar. eatsblog.dallasnews.com.