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Puget Sound BUSINESS JOURNAL

April 16-22, 2010 | Vol. 30, No. 52 | pugetsoundbusinessjournal.com | \$3.00

Business Leaders Get It.

Stellar views aside, at Ventana, the best visuals may be the food



Questions for | JOSEPH CONRAD

Favorite cooking utensil: Spoon

Favorite appliance: Vitaprep blender

Comfort food: Fried pork tenderloin sandwich

Favorite spice: Ras el hanout

Three things always in your refrigerator/pantry: Butter, secret stash sea salt, thyme

Lay up meal: Mac 'n' cheese

Anything wouldn't eat/ cook: Bluefin tuna, it's being overfished

Strangest dish prepared: Sweetcorn panna cotta, with salted caramel popcorn, and huit-lacoche ice cream

Ventana means window in Spanish, which is apt for this inviting new Belltown restaurant. Its tabletops look like windows covered with an extra layer of glass and its First Avenue corner location, perched above the south end of the Battery Street Tunnel, has great street and Sound views.

Even so, the best visuals might be the food. Executive Chef Joseph Conrad, formerly of Qube, works small wonders with a short, short menu consisting entirely of small plates.

He had us with the Carlton Farms Pork Spare Ribs (\$12). They came on a square white platter, virtually a frame for a gorgeous painting. The ribs were dark bold strokes; minted watermelon and splashes of pomegranate glaze were fanciful accents.

It's one thing to look good, but better to taste good. And those ribs were fantastic. They were crispy on the edges and falling-off-the-bone tender, with a deep smoky flavor enhanced by the coolness and sweetness of the minted watermelon. Cocoa nibs added a deeper, subtle richness.

Conrad had us again with the Korean BBQ Beef Short Ribs (\$14). It was another visual knockout, three cubes of meat strung together with a glistening necklace of house-made kimchi and bits of crystallized cantaloupe. One of the beef cubes sat on a bed of congee, an Asian porridge

that in this context looked like mashed potatoes. The meat had plenty of flavor; the sharpness of the kimchi and comfort-food softness of the congee made it even more satisfying.

But Conrad *really* had us with dessert, a mini-miracle called Financier Cake (\$7). The almond-flavored cake was soaked in Meyer lemon syrup, sweetened with tangerine segments and blessed with wonderfully savory fennel ice cream. In a word — wow.

On the Menu

Ventana Restaurant: 2323 1st Ave., Seattle

Phone: 206.441.4789

Web: www.ventanaseattle.com

Hours: Open 4:30 p.m.-2 a.m. daily; dinner service 5-midnight

Incidentals: Full bar, major credit cards accepted, street parking, no barriers to access.

Executive summary: "New American" small plates in a sleek, big-windowed setting. The food is creative and pretty, the prices moderate, the portions big enough to share.

er of a choice if there ever was one — looked and tasted great. Dusted with pecorino and in a sauce of brown butter, lemon and melted white anchovies, the little cabbages were almost addictive.

With nearby Twist, Ventana shares an owner, Dave Lyon, and Conrad, who is also Twist's executive chef.

The newer place opened in October, padding the pointy corners of what used to be a high-end Asian antiques gallery with comfy banquettes. It has a well-dressed urban vibe, like Twist, only with straighter lines and maybe a little too much techno music. We had a small problem with the little overhead lights aimed at our eyeballs, but the staff promptly and cheerfully hit the dimmer.

These are hard times, for customers as well as restaurants. Ventana addresses that admirably with heaping portions of edamame (\$3) and truffle fries (\$6) and an \$8 house green salad — mizuma with shaved pecorino and lemon vinaigrette — plenty big enough to share. The higher priced plates — the gems that dazzled us — are \$12-15.

At those prices, Ventana's food is a bargain. At any price, it's worth a try.

And it comes with excellent service. Our waitress anticipated our needs, recommended good wines and generally charmed us. Another server, an "expeditor" who brought the loaded plates to the table, added an extra consumer-friendly layer with a quick reminder of each dish's special features.

They are indeed special. Now, if only Chef Conrad would lighten up a bit on the salt.

One of our anonymous reviewers regularly visits a Puget Sound-area restaurant unannounced. The Puget Sound Business Journal pays for all meals. Opinions expressed here are strictly those of the reviewer. The Q&A was conducted by Business Journal staff following the review.