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Around the World in 9 Small Plates

by: KIMMIE YAN

With the growing trend of small plates taking over the culinary landscape, I figured it was time to investigate how Asian cuisine translates into this movement. I'd heard rumblings about an established restaurant on Sawtelle Blvd., commonly known as West LA's neo-Tokyo hub. Nestled among Asian stand-bys like Lollicup and Shabu-Shabu House, Orris Restaurant seemed to be a logical choice for diners looking for an Asian-inspired (but global) experience.

With two friends in tow, I visited Orris Restaurant, noticing right away the minimalist décor, a nice touch allowing the food to be the showstopper here.

We started the night with a bottle of Terra Serena Prosecco, an extra dry spumanti that worked well with our first round of dishes. I knew going in the dishes would be impressive; owner Chef Shiro chooses only the freshest ingredients daily. His dedication to the art of world cuisine has won him numerous awards throughout the years, and his passion can be seen in each dish he prepares.

I couldn't resist ordering one of the most popular menu items—the crabmeat and cucumber salad, featuring sweet crabmeat and an understated, creamy dressing. My friends and I dug into our tiny dish with gusto, and the plate was soon empty.

Our next dish, tempura-style squash blossoms stuffed with shrimp mousse, was luscious. The bubbles of the Prosecco, which also enhanced the sweetness of the shrimp mousse filling, tempered the saltiness nicely. Sadly, the overpowering olive salsa that accompanied the squash threw off the impeccable balance of this plate.

As much as I extol the virtues of sparkling wine and its ability to pair well with every kind of food, I have to admit a slight miscalculation when it came to the curry-infused shrimp tempura. Oft lauded as one of Orris' signature dishes, I felt certain the tiny bit of bitterness inherent in this Prosecco would cut nicely through the sauce. Disappointingly, the curry flavor was almost indiscernible, flattened even more by the Prosecco. However, the Okinawan sea salt next to the shrimp was a lovely foil to the creaminess.

Incompatibility with curry sauce aside, the Prosecco was a truly delicious wine. Terre Serena Prosecco is made from grapes grown in the Conegliano Veneto region of Italy. With its golden color and barely acidic nose, this refreshing sparkling wine goes down smoothly.

Of course, with empty glasses and more food on the way, we had to order more wine. This time, though, we opted for something with a little more substance—the featured wine from Argentina, a Tamari Malbec, pressed from grapes grown in the Andean Foothill region. With a twinge of sweetness and a faint aroma of grass, the Malbec was a fine choice for the dishes that lay ahead.

I knew instantly Orris' filet mignon skewer with Roquefort butter would be a hit at our table. The butter sauce is simple and elegant, comprised of melted butter blended with nutty, pungent cheese. This blue sheep's cheese is one of France's most popular exports, and it's easy to see why. When combined with the butter and drizzled over the expertly grilled filet, the true beauty of the Roquefort emerged. Fragrantly creamy, each bite brought swoons of joy from my friends and I. I tasted this dish with the Malbec, which stood up to the cheese flavor and cut the oily feel of the butter.

Never one to miss an opportunity to eat foie gras, we had to try Chef Shiro's seared foie gras. With the taste of Malbec on our tongues, we dove in. The foie was perfectly prepared, sprinkled with just a bit of salt and pepper and cooked in a scorching hot pan. The creaminess of foie worked beautifully with both the sweetened soy reduction and lightly roasted peeled eggplant. While this combination could feel a bit heavy-handed, the Malbec's faint acidity lightened the layers of richness to produce an ideal sensory experience.

Still hungry, the cheese plate called our names, and for good reason. A selection that changes daily, Chef Shiro's choices are based on the best of what's available from local markets and importers. For us, that meant servings of fresh chevre, Spanish sheep's milk, domestic sheep's milk, and French cow's milk cheeses. Each paired well with the Malbec, as promised by our knowledgeable waiter.

To end our meal on a sweet note, we ordered the berry wonton, chocolate soufflé cake, and Tahitian vanilla gelato. The berry wonton utilized fried wonton wrappers marvelously, layering them with a berry-infused pastry cream and fresh blueberries. The chocolate soufflé cake was, predictably, intense. The best component of this dessert was the coffee gelato, with just enough bitterness to offset the sumptuousness of the chocolate. Light, velvety, and faintly sweet, the gelato served as the perfect finish to a delightful meal.

Despite a long-ish wait and crowded tables, Orris exceeded our expectations. Because each plate at Orris is tiny, affording each guest just a few bites if you go with a crowd, we were able to sample all that our hearts (and stomachs) desired. Slightly more upscale than the average restaurant on this Asian-centric street, Chef Shiro's tiny establishment deserves acknowledgment as a leader in global cuisine.

Orris
2006 Sawtelle Blvd. Los Angeles, CA 90025
310.268.2212 www.orrisrestaurant.com
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