

Restaurant review: Fearing's ★★☆☆☆
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Blood orange yogurt, grapefruit and meyer lemon sorbet with orange cream-filled crepes at Fearing's restaurant inside the Ritz-Carlton in Uptown Dallas.

Here come the waiters bearing plates. Eyeing one another, they pause at the table and time it right – one, two, three is the silent count – and, *voilà*, the appetizers land. "A trio of griddled lump crab cakes with a barbecue duck tamale," one waiter sings, and "seared Hudson Valley foie gras," begins another. "Yellowtail two ways ... here you have hamachi sashimi with ..." "Two-bite lobster tacos with avocado relish ..." Hey, all three waiters are talking at once! "Lobster fritters, wild arugula and maitake mushroom salad ..." "... with avocado wasabi purée, with basil peanut salad ..."

"... with cashew butter and rhubarb compote," "...with candied pineapple."

Did you get that?

My friends and I are at Fearing's, the snazzy, jazzy, exuberant restaurant in the Ritz-Carlton, Dallas. Here you get so much more than just dinner: It's dinner and a show. In the main tent, the legendary, the one-and-only, Dallas' very own super-chef Dean Fearing rocks the table-schmooze. (Oohs and aahs and a round of applause.) On the plates, ladies and gentlemen, great ingredients, techniques and big flavors galore!

The sideshow is the collection of colorful diners scattered around – a 60-something gent in a Panama hat tucking into dinner after a turn on the patio lounge, a 20-something woman with her nose in her laptop as her fork stabs something savory.

First you choose your setting. Will it be the Sendero room, with its inviting wicker banquettes, views out to the patio and a gorgeous chandelier dripping icicle-like crystals? Or Dean's Kitchen, the busy, buzzy heart of the place, where you can practically feel the cooks' adrenaline running? Maybe the Gallery, the most intimate and formal room, the room for marking anniversaries and sealing business deals?

Do consider arriving early for a drink, either in the glossy, dimly lighted Rattlesnake Bar or outside on the slouchy-chic patio lounge. The new list of house cocktails is a few

shades more sophisticated than the one that preceded it. I recommend the Algonquin: (ri)¹ whiskey, Dolin dry vermouth, pineapple juice and a dash of angostura bitters. It's got just the right balance of pineapple and rye, without going too sweet.

Not that Fearing's is about restraint. A quick parsing of those three appetizers, please.

Madame, you'll start with the trio of griddled lump crab cakes accented with Sonny Bryan's barbecue sauce. Sharing the plate is a barbecue duck tamale, its corn husk wrapper upright like a bowl; it's garnished with a tangle of julienned carrot and red bell pepper and a crumble of cotija cheese. Plus a couple of mini lobster tacos – luscious little morsels, their soft, chewy tortillas enfolding tender lobster meat. Drag them through a bit of that guacamole on their way to your mouth. Finally, there's a shot glass of gazpacho-like virgin michelada, the Mexican tomato drink usually made with beer.

Sir, you'll be tucking into yellowtail two ways: pristine sliced hamachi sashimi from Tokyo's famous Tsukiji market over an avocado purée spiked with wasabi. Next to that is a basil-peanut salad, and then you have kampachi (Hawaiian yellowtail) tartare with candied pineapple and hearts of palm. (OK, so that tartare's a tad sweet.)

And for madame, the seared Hudson Valley foie gras set atop a bed of cashew butter. Yes, the crazy pairing's over-the-top rich, but a bright-flavored rhubarb compote acts as a foil for the beautifully seared foie. Next to that you have wild arugula and umami-intense maitake mushrooms, the salad enrobed in a foie-gras-enriched white balsamic dressing. Oh, and lobster fritters.

Does it sound like too much? It is. Too much, too unctuous, too intense. The combination of the cashew butter and the foie is like billionaire baby food.

Nor does the evening come cheap: Those three starters ring up at \$72, before tax and tip. Main courses are mostly \$40 to \$50 each, and the wine list is an aspirational volume filled with three-figure cult cabs and one-day-when-I-get-rich Burgundies. Want an Italian red? They *start* at \$93 (for a 2003 Poderi Elia Barbaresco).

Hard to imagine that Fearing's opened less than three years ago, it feels like such an integral part of the Dallas scene. The Mansion? Yes, yes, chef Fearing ruled there for more than two decades. But that was then, and this is now. And if the spirit of Fearing's isn't what an unwitting visitor might expect from a Ritz-Carlton, well, that's how we do things here in Big D. It's all-out fun, and yet elegant at the same time.

Fearing's plates are big, his Southwestern and Asian flavors effusive and his products top-notch. Sometimes the total effect is an ill-advised confusion of flavors and textures. A few dishes fall flat, the big flavors failing to add up to something memorable.

But sometimes, it all comes boisterously together.

Apricot-glazed barbecue bobwhite quail, an appetizer, arrives tender and moist, with terrific flavor; the touch of apricot elevates it without overwhelming. Improbably, it comes with a wedge salad: iceberg adorned with crumbles of creamy Point Reyes blue

cheese, bits of cider-braised bacon and a tiny dice of ripe tomato. Surprisingly, the combination sings

Even more fun is Fearing's interpretation of the British working-class dish bangers and mash. He fashions haute sausages from Broken Arrow Ranch antelope, pork and chicken, pairs them with rosy slices of grilled antelope sirloin and adds a taste of "bubble and squeak" – braised cabbage. Does it need a Yorkshire pudding? No, but maybe Fearing can't help himself. More, more, more! (This dish came off the menu at the end of April.)

My favorite dish lately was Van Vooren Ranch pheasant – succulent smoked slices splayed out over a summery sauté of sweet corn kernels, confit fennel and piquillo peppers. I could do without the rather dull "loaded" potato enchilada, but the sauce – a velvety green "chorizo ranchero," made by combining a rich chorizo-pheasant stock with ranchero sauce – is brilliant.

Tempting as it sounds, I'd skip the signature chicken-fried Maine lobster with pan-roasted "BBQ spiced" fillet. Though the beef is super tender, deep-frying the lobster tail in that batter seems to tamp down its flavor, and setting it on asadero-cheese-enriched mashed potatoes makes it a mushy blur. The correct but banal spinach taco that comes with it doesn't perk up the plate.

Desserts are less exuberant than the rest, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. Best lately was a trio of frozen citrus treats: pink grapefruit and Meyer lemon sorbets, plus a blood orange yogurt, served with delicate orange-scented, mascarpone-filled crêpes.

Servers seem to be everywhere, whizzing around in their happy orange-and-white striped shirts. They're attentive, but not obtrusive (except for the cacaphonic dish descriptions). Service is Fearing's strong suit.

When sommelier Paul Botamer pairs my foie gras with a glass of syrupy Pedro Ximenez sherry, our wonderful, watchful waiter sneaks me a glass of 5-puttonyo Hungarian Tokaji (also sweet, but much lighter; the puttonyo count is a measure of sugar). I love sherries, but I'm not a fan of Pedro Ximenez types; they're too sweet and heavy for me, and that rich dish cries out for something lighter. Did the waiter see my face fall when the sherry landed? Was it a sixth sense? That's great service.

And Botamer's misstep is completely out of character. Every time I've been to the restaurant he's been quick to appear tableside with excellent advice. One time, as I was reeling over the expensive list, I told him we were looking for a light red to pair with our main courses. His eyes lit up. He was pouring some interesting light reds for a tasting in another room, he said, and he'd be happy to let us taste. Great! He brought one, a silky grenache-syrah blend from California's Central Coast, friendly yet complex, with lovely roast red fruit aromas and a long, lingering finish. Morgan was the producer. This would be perfect. He leaned in close to me, a devilish look on his face, and whispered, "The best part? It's only \$38 a bottle."

Then he set a Riedel stem before the teenager in our party and presented him a bottle for inspection. Something to go with his big-eye tuna duo. Botamer poured, and the young

man tasted and approved, looking like the happiest teen in the world. It was a glass of Navarro Gewürztraminer: grape juice made from wine grapes.

That's Fearing's all over. Everyone, and that means everyone, is meant to have fun.