

Hidden gem serves dinners with flair

At Oz Kafé, happy staff dole out vibrant dishes

By Anne Desbrisay, The Ottawa Citizen February 8, 2012

Oz Kafé
361 Elgin St., 613-234-0907
ozkafe.com

Open Tuesday to Sunday, 5 p.m. to 2 a.m.
Starters, \$6 to \$10; main dishes, \$15 to 30

Fully accessible, though washrooms cramped

You needn't be searching for a brain or a heart or courage to head to Oz. Simply seeking some solidly good, reasonably priced food, delivered by nice people in a fun place will set you on the right path.

In 2007, I thought it didn't have a hope. It seemed too obscure, too out of sight. (Yes, OK, there is a sign, but it just says "OZ" and what the heck's an "OZ?") Then I had a meal, returned for another, enjoyed them very much (I was served with class by a bearded dude called Dorothy – naturally) and thought: "Gee whiz. I hope people find this place. But location? Might as well be in Kansas."

I need not have worried. I couldn't get a table at any of my December attempts – at least not until past my bedtime. And though there's no doubt many have walked by Oz without ever noticing it – including my supper buddies one visit, seasoned restaurant-goers both – there seems no lack of those who do know it. Indeed, Oz Kafé, set back and a bit beneath Elgin Street, in a row of shops and restaurants under the Kensington Apartments, seems embedded in the hearts of its loyal community.

Oz's strengths include the steady (and steadying) presence of owner Ozlem Balpinar, happy and proficient servers, food that has a vibrancy and freshness, and a smartly chosen, well-priced wine list, about the right length for the food list.

Chef Jamie Stunt (assisted by Simon Bell) is clearly able. Stunt has a flair all his own and its imprinted on his menu. Where else do you find a walleye hot pot, a beet tartare, vegetarian bento boxes, sizzling Korean bulgogi and a plate of baklava on the same page?

Pages, actually. Nothing inspires hope in me more than seeing a kitchen's list of seasonal daily specials. And these are written out and handed to you, rather than simply recited, or scrawled on a blackboard nailed to a wall on the other side of the room. (I thank you.)



Who does oysters with mushroom duxelle anymore? Chef Jamie Stunt does, and his Grilled Oysters with Mushroom Duxelles, Cream and Parmesan impressed our critic, along with almost everything else.
Photograph by: BRUNO SCHLUMBERGER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Like so many of his industry peers, Stunt is dedicated to using the best local product, and it shows well in dishes like roasted butternut squash soup with smoked duck; beetroot tartare with pickled shallots, celery leaves and apple; O'Brien Farms rib-eye with smoked mashed potatoes. There are some luxury ingredients here, but mostly these are humble dishes raised to something special and priced at points that kick up the appeal a notch.

Who does roasted oysters with mushroom duxelle anymore? Three St-Simon beauties are baked in their juices with wild mushrooms, cream, parsley and Parmesan. And Oz's Caesar salad— with chewy-good bacon, shards of Parmesan, roasted garlic and deep fried capers — has a sunny dressing shot through with intensely flavourful lemon confit.

It's simply the best Caesar of the year. Yes, the year is young, and to be truthful, it's the first Caesar of the year, but every one that follows will need to measure up.

You can taste a lemon grove in the Albacore tuna conserva as well, the fish poached in an oil bath, aromatic and herbed, and with more of those salty-crunchy capers. Art-is-in fennel toasties are provided for ferrying the fish salad to mouth.

One night, to our white linen clad tables (remember those?) comes soup. Thirty-two below seemed to demand as much. A silky butternut squash broth, sweet and dark from roasted flesh, topped with chunks of smoked duck, a swirl of crème fraîche, snipped chives. The skin of our pickerel is spice-crusting and crisp, the flesh falls in soft petals. The fish mates with a winter mix of Le Coprin mushrooms, arugula, squash, pickled eggplant, and grilled endive. The smoked mashed potatoes are superb, blobbed next to a first-class rib-eye served with crunchy wasabi peas. The one and only issue I had was with the beef tataki, which was tougher than ideal.

For dessert, I've tried baklava, and bread pudding with caramel and cream. Both were good.

Our candle burns out, and it's relit within seconds. Our water glasses are perpetually filled. A clear and strong connection between the kitchen staff and the servers is obvious. They laugh a lot around here. It all adds up to a pleasurable, easy-to-take dinner.

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