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Elevate taste buds at Irvine eatery

By ELIZABETH EVANS

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Conscious. KAHN-chuss (adj.): 1. awake and responsive to stimuli. 2. Aware of something and attaching importance to it. 3. Considered and deliberate, or done with critical awareness.

These are the first of six definitions for a word that is thrown around without much, well, consciousness.

It is also the word that attracts my attention when I am pondering where I want to eat for this review. Andrei's Conscious Cuisine in Irvine has one of those monikers that doesn't seem to fit. To be honest, it sounds like it's one of those dandelion flower and wheat germ places that sprouted up with the counterculture of the 1960s.

Indeed, a dandelion is part of the logo at this stylish new Irvine eatery. But this is no throwback. The conscious part – and the label that can mislead – comes from the eatery's dedication to serving sustainable, local and organic food. Andrei's is also named for the owners' late brother and son.

But maybe the aforementioned flower cum weed is apt, as this eatery has popped up in a most unlikely place: along a street that is occupied by office blocks and rather undistinguished looking hotels.

When I pull up to the complimentary valet, I'm still trying to get my head around it. Is it a watering hole for the lawyers and real estate agents who work nearby? Or a spot for those staying in the neighborhood inns to grab a meal? Or will I be given wheat grass juice and uncooked sesame seeds pounded into patties?

Even knowing that chef Yves Fournier has moved from his kitchen post across the street at the Hyatt Regency's Six Park Grill hasn't eased my mind.

A lavish water wall at the entrance intrigues. So, too, the sylphlike hostess who leads us upstairs to the breezy, earth-toned dining room. At lunch there are plenty of suited types, yet the high ceilings and airy setting feel as if they could be miles from any sort of crowd.

We start with an order of the pommes frites (\$7). These French fries are lightly flavored with truffle salt, and though not supermodel skinny, they are a just-right slender – like a reality TV mom who looks good after a tummy tuck. Grilled artichoke (\$10) is lovely to look at. The dusty green thistle is sliced in half, topped with Parmesan and garlic, and striped with grill marks. Served with a light lemon vinaigrette, it has the right balance of smoke and tang, even if it's just a little difficult to eat daintily.

Among the handful of main salads is the Andrei's Chop Salad (\$15). This dish might be a little too big in scale. Chunks of chicken and polenta croutons are cumbersome to eat. They are scattered over a bed of greens, cucumbers, avocado, figs, corn, pistachios, tomatoes and goat cheese. It reminds me of an updated Waldorf salad.

Alaskan Halibut (\$18) is my favorite fish. This white flesh is mellow enough in flavor to work well with a variety of ingredients, and firm enough not to fall apart under pressure. Here it has its work cut out for it. The filet is wrapped in pancetta ham and served over a bed of the house hummus. It's then teamed with fennel and fava beans drizzled with pomegranate glaze and a touch of mint yogurt and cumin salt. It has a lot going on, but it works.

In the evening, the space is transformed. Light streams in at a slant through the wide, slatted shades, and the open windows allow in a sweet evening breeze. There's a musician performing softly in the bar, and from our seat with a view over the palm trees, we feel as if

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we could be on a tropical island.

For dinner, we start with the Grilled Ham and Cheese (\$8), which is one of those got-to-order items I'd seen on my first visit. It contains quite good, thick slices of prosciutto, with Humboldt Fog cheese topped with béchamel sauce, served warm with black olive tapenade. It's a bit salty, but it pairs nicely with the lovely Jaboulet Parallel 45 rosé (\$7 a glass).

If the ham and cheese are a nod to the south of France, Mediterranean Tasting (\$9) is a sample of more eastern regions. Baba ghanoush, a traditional eggplant dish, is cleanly prepared here; the pale green mix is well textured and lightly seasoned. The hummus, a garbanzo bean spread punctuated with garlic and lemon, is a little dry. Tzatziki is the best of the spreads served on this platter.

The main course portion of the menu is a hard one from which to choose. Chef Fournier has an inventive palate, and his ingredients are first rate.

Chicken is a consolation prize on many menus, but here, the mahogany-skinned, roasted bird is a treat. Under the browned skin is tender white meat atop a cinnamon- and cumin-scented couscous that is studded with dried cherries and grilled figs. Lovely baby carrots in various shades of orange, red and yellow, as well as a tangle of pea shoots, add more than just color to this presentation.

Braised Beef (\$18) is also worth noting. The large short ribs are cooked to the point of falling apart, and the beef flavor is intense. They are served under a mélange of sautéed mushrooms and teamed with fried sweet potatoes.

Desserts range from artisan ice creams (\$7) to a California cheese tasting (\$9). We opt for the tarts. A Chocolate and Caramel (\$7) is the winner, Though the crust is slightly tough – holding strong under the decadent dark chocolate ganache filling and thick layer of golden caramel – it doesn't detract from the pure flavors.

As we enjoy our last meal at the restaurant I notice a couple of standouts among this crowd of mostly business-attired diners. A couple with long, graying pony tails and tie-dyed T-shirts sit at the bar, and a lone woman in a Peruvian-style sweater and hand-carved walking stick tucks into a Mediterranean platter at a table near us. It looks like they, too, were seeking consciousness. I hope they found it. I think I did.

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