



## Proof Positive

The striking contemporary-art display of chic, cosmopolitan Proof on Main upstages a menu that includes artfully presented treasures of its own. **By Stephen Hacker**

I tend to favor a restaurant's food over its atmosphere. If a plate is full of flavor and an interesting combination of ingredients, I usually don't care if I'm sitting at a white-tablecloth banquette next to a sequined socialite or jammed onto a vinyl stool between two construction workers. But recent visits to the new Proof on Main turned this formula on its head — I enjoyed the food, but the ambience was what made me want to go back.

Proof on Main is part of the 21C Hotel of art collectors Steve Wilson and Laura Lee Brown, who persuaded New York's Myriad Restaurant Group (known for Nobu and the Tribeca Grill, among other restaurants) to open an eatery in the Derby City. While the restaurant looks out onto Main Street, it also flows back seamlessly into the main building, which contains a dazzling selection of avant-garde artwork. (Art is omnipresent, even in the restrooms, which feature miniature video screens embedded into the mirrors — a very cool touch that will only go unappreciated by those with "shy bladder syndrome.") The space seems big on rectangles, and the exposed-brick walls and steel supports in the central dining area are some of the only reminders of the building's 19th-century heritage. The look is airy, inviting and unmistakably urban — and in my opinion, creates a feel of an entirely different Louisville.

Though not quite on a level with the ambience, overall I found the food at Proof to be quite good. While nominally influenced by the cuisine of Tuscany, executive chef Michael Paley's often-changing menu incorporates regional products and a world of flavors. A very un-Tuscan crispy duck (\$18), for instance, featured earthy turnips and silky oyster mushrooms paired with pink, tender slices of duck breast and plump legs in a five-spice-scented marinade. Pork cheek Milanese (\$18) was a simple dish of pounded pork cheek, breaded and topped with a salad of arugula, grape tomatoes and balsamic vinegar, providing a tender blast of excellent pork flavor from what many people would consider an unusual cut.

Did I mention that I love the atmosphere at Proof on Main? Part of it may be the efficient, friendly staff that was already polished in the first few weeks after the March opening. Servers were cordial and eager to explain specials, drinks and side dishes. The bar, a haven of hipness, is off to one side of the main dining area, but any table can enjoy (as I did) the 21st Century (\$10), an excellent warm-weather concoction of Quintessential gin, white crème de cacao and fresh lemon juice, or an Oleana (\$10), a fresh take on a Brazilian cocktail called the *caipirinha*. The tables are close together, especially at the banquettes lining each side of the main

dining area. This isn't really a bad thing, as it tends to enhance the cosmopolitan vibe (and may, as it did on one of my visits, lead to genial conversations with strangers over the nature and quality of what you're eating).

Proof's starters and side dishes are meant to be shared — but you might want to choose carefully. I found the cured meats (\$6 each, \$16 per platter) to be less than inspired. The rotating selection of relishes (\$3 each, \$12 per tray) were excellent, however — standouts include gently curried tender-crisp cauliflower, spicy and crunchy chickpeas, and a delicately marinated bowl of quartered radishes. I also enjoyed a simmering plate of baked octopus (\$10), with the tenderized cephalopod serving as a delicious sop for its garlicky, chili-laced oil bath.

Among the main courses, the playfully named Surf and Turf (\$24) paired a skate wing with veal cheek ragù and Weisenberger grits. The ray fish was lightly breaded, meaty yet tender, and enhanced by a touch of gremolata. It didn't harmonize with the hearty ragù in its "bowl" of grits, but neither of the flavors overpowered the other; instead, they presented a pleasing contrast.

Proof's side dishes (\$5), however, were inconsistent. I thought my pea pods in *bagna cauda* (an anchovy-infused sauce) were an interesting idea, but the hot oil made the pods limp and a little bitter. The house-made Brussels sprouts, by contrast, were a standout — richly flavored with pancetta and Cinzano vermouth and expertly done to bring out the sweetness of the vegetable.

All in all, the food at Proof has a nice sensibility, and desserts are no exception. The sorbets (\$6 for two scoops) were very good, presented with a small wooden spoon and forcefully delivering (in my case) true pineapple and raspberry flavor. But the chocolate fondue (\$12) was pure fun — its sweet chocolate surrounded by a bounty of berries, biscotti, pound cake that seemed more like candied brioche, and some heavenly homemade marshmallows. As a final touch of sweet restaurant whimsy, Proof delivers a bit of cotton candy to your table along with the bill.

It's a confident, urban presentation perfectly matched with Proof's new-Louisville surroundings.

## If You Go

**PROOF ON MAIN**, 720 W. Main St., 217-6360. Open Monday through Thursday 5:30 p.m. to 10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday 5:30 p.m. to 11 p.m. Bar service open Monday through Thursday, 5 p.m. to midnight and Friday and Saturday, 5 p.m. to 1 a.m.