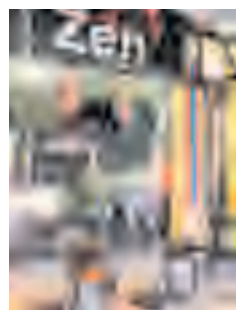


Good Living

BYO Reviews



By Michael Franco

The Place

Zen Café. 1000 East Coast Parkway, Unit A-8, Marine Cove, 6449 3221. (Park in lot next to East Coast Park MacDonald's.) Average price: \$125 dinner for two with your own wine, including \$20 corkage fee.

Like the Zen state of "no mind" this tiny restaurant is hard to find. You can't see it from either the beach or the highway side of East Coast Park, but it's worth the perseverance to

seek the culinary enlightenment it offers. There is both indoor (air conditioned but very tiny) and outdoor (fan cooled but more spacious) dining options and the soundtrack seems to be a perpetual replaying of a Norah Jones album. Just try to think of it as a 47-minute mantra.

The Wine

A 2007 Weingut Robert Weil Riesling.

The Food

While there is an extensive menu here offering a blend of both eastern dishes like red curry and western choices like kangaroo steak, the best bet is to choose from one of the many sets that offer exceptional value and a chance to try a wide variety of flavours. On the night we went, we enjoyed the kobe beef set (it is actually described as "kobe-like") which started off with a super fresh sashimi, continued with an earthy oriental mushroom soup which set the stage perfectly for the beef main—thin medallions of tender beef placed atop

swoon-inducing truffle mashed potatoes. Dessert was a shot of tiramisu. All was prepared well, served hot and bursting with flavour.

The Pairing

This Riesling has a "trocken" or "dry" designation. Its grassy, grapefruit-like strength held up nicely against all of the dishes, brightening the sushi, "cooling" the soup and even holding its own against the beef. It was also a perfect palate cleanse in between each course of the generous set.

The Service

We've seen better service at this restaurant than we did on our most recent visit. While earnest, our waiter seemed a bit puzzled by some requests (for example, he didn't really know what "rare" meant). At first we thought the wine was being allowed to chill in the bucket that was promptly brought to our table (even though it was cold on arrival) when we sat down. But soon we realized that it had just been forgotten and we had to ask to have it opened and poured. We were also left to our own for refills, but we actually prefer that to aggressive pourers.

The Verdict

Gourmet food, reasonably priced and (usually) perfectly served. We'll be back with another Riesling in hand, as it worked well across the broad spectrum of flavours in Zen's array of set dinners.

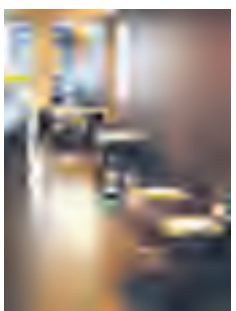
**The Place**

Table 66 66 Tras St, 6225 6690. Average price: \$150 dinner for two with your own wine, including \$30 corkage fee. Corkage fee is waived on your own bottle if you also purchase a bottle. No corkage on Mondays.

Amidst the smattering of neon bars along Tras Street, Table 66 is a welcome refuge. A small bar area with a gleaming steel counter draws you back into an airy, white, skylit space. Mod green fabric

chairs with transparent bases offer surprisingly comfortable seating at intimate tables. We visited on a Monday night to take advantage of the BYO special that waives corkage fees, so the room was mostly empty.

The Wine

2007 Chateau Pey La Bordeaux.

The Food

It might be earning its reputation as a set-lunch spot for the area businesses, but the dinner—especially for a Monday night—was superb. The sous vide egg benedict starter combined the richness of a poached egg, the earthiness of portobello mushrooms and the bright vegetal taste of spinach dressed in a light vinaigrette to good effect. For mains, we tried a duck and fish dish. The duck was served both as tender smoked slices of breast meat as well as sous vide crispy leg and the five spice jus perfectly balanced the bird's flavour rather than overpowering it. The fish plate

consisted of simply seared tuna medallions along with a cereal crusted cod that delivered a surprising dash of vanilla. A ginger soy jus pulled all the flavours together and left behind a broth that begged to be slurped. We minded our manners, but the temptation was mighty.

The Pairing

This Bordeaux consists of 77% merlot, 14% cabernet sauvignon, 8% cabernet franc and 1% petit verdot, so we found different components of the wine coming forward with different dishes. The velvety depth of the merlot brought out the richness in the egg starter while the peppery overtones of the cab stood up nicely against the duck. All in all, a perfect pairing for a perfectly diverse meal.

The Service

Impeccable. On arrival we asked for our wine to be decanted and this request was carried out without the furrowed brow and confusion we've encountered at other BYOB fine-dining restaurants. The wine was allowed to breathe before being poured, and the pouring service (as with the food service) was perfectly paced; our bottle lasted the entire meal.

The Verdict

It might be a wee bit pricey, but for the outstanding food and rare level of service, it's well worth a treat. Go on Mondays and not only will you have the corkage waived, you might even have the room to yourself!

