

REVIEW

BY ROBIN KLEVEN DISHON

Currant

location > 140 West Broadway

phone > 619-702-6309

chef > Jonathan Pflueger



Hibachi-style salmon with green-tea soba noodles, Asian vegetables and Mandarin orange butter.

OUR LAST DINING REVIEW lamented the impermanence of the San Diego dining scene: “Too often, promising young men and women rise to prominence in San Diego, win our hearts, and then move on.” But this month, we’re toasting a return.

The chef who transformed Anthony’s time-warped Star of the Sea Room into a cutting-edge seafood house back in 1995 has returned from a long tour of duty on both coasts that included overseeing the 2006 reopening of New York’s grandiose Russian Tea Room. Yes, that would be Jonathan Pflueger, who found himself commanding a team of 88 chefs between four floors, churning out a thousand gallons of borscht at a time.

“It was really special,” says Pflueger fondly of his Tea Room turn as executive sous-chef. “But that place is more about theater and production. I wanted to get back to more of an intimate dining experience.”

The closest Pflueger gets to theater now are the Spreckels and Civic theaters, a few blocks from his new venture on the lower reaches of Broadway. “Jonathan Pflueger’s Currant,” as the ground-floor bistro in the Sofia Hotel is known, puts the spotlight where it belongs: on the cooking.

As co-owner and head chef, Pflueger has been able to oversee design and a menu to fit his concept: an American version of a French brasserie. “We were looking for a level of sophistication,” he says, “but above that, comfort and warmth, and a vivacious energy.”

More about the dining room later. Let’s talk about the stars of this Broadway show.

Starters strut the boards with every bit as much presence as entrées. Top billing goes to the sumptuous foie gras, splashed

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REVIEW

with cherry glaze and paired with an equally sumptuous truffled white-corn risotto (\$18), and to the beet salad, generously presented with a leek quiche and creamy chèvre on the side (\$9). The chef pickles the beets (a much-used technique at the Tea Room) for extra flavor, then strains the juice to create a puckery, pleasing vinaigrette.

Parsnip soup (\$9) teams this homely vegetable with celery root and fennel, plus a dash of apple and pear, for a potage of great warmth and complexity. A riff on old-fashioned gravlax with blini plays up citrus-cured sturgeon with soft, pumpkiny waffles and crème fraîche (\$12). Lastly, a pot of portly Prince Edward Island mussels, ample for a meal (\$13), arrives classically steamed in white wine.

THE CULINARY TONY for best main course goes to the sautéed skate (\$25), prized on the East Coast and Europe but a tough sell for many San Diegans. Here, the distinctively striated flesh—which must be impeccably fresh to be edible—is prepared brasserie style, with a quick sauté in capers and browned butter that heightens the richness of the fish. *Magnifique!*

Runner-up honors go to the Jidori chicken—you really *can* taste the difference with these uncaged, hormone-free birds—simply roasted with butter and herbs, then plated over a spinach-and-sourdough salad amply moistened with pan juices (\$20).

A whopping barbecued pork chop (\$23) shows up in a torrid chipotle glaze that may be too spicy for some. But the meat's marvelous, as are accompanying white beans smokily seasoned with thyme, sage and toasted cumin.

As for duck confit (\$18), the leg is finished in the oven for a hard, lacquered exterior that initially defies knife and fork. Be persistent, and you'll find abundant moist dark meat, with a great supporting cast of chevre- and currant-spread toasts and winey lentils.

For dessert, one showstopper is the crème fraîche gelato, piquant as sour cream and paired with pastry-wrapped caramelized bananas and cardamom-

scented sauce. It's \$7, as are other treats like profiteroles, classic bread pudding and crème brûlée. A gallery of sweet after-dinner cocktails or a glass of port or madeira are other options. The wine list, by the way, features a number of choices under \$10 a glass, and there's a full bar as well.

Service is still a bit unsteady, although the restaurant had been open for more than two months on our initial visit. That night, an onslaught of guests headed for *Jersey Boys* slowed both the kitchen and staff to a crawl. Things moved more smoothly a week later, but if you have a train to catch (or a show to see), let your server know up front.

Speaking of trains, the soaring ceilings, tiled floor and elegant archways of this dining room remind us of an Art Deco train station, only cozier. Columns surround the inviting, semiprivate bar area, set off by artful custom-made screens from the banquettes and table seating in the main room.

Some tables, unfortunately, have a direct view of the hotel lobby, where a widescreen television plays nonstop. Seeing Fox News all evening reminds us more of a red-state airport than a charming brasserie.

At lunch, Currant takes on a dressy bistro feel as the legal crowd spills out from the nearby court buildings, while at night, a mix of singles and groups of all ages (and attire) shows up. Unless you want to park in a distant lot and walk through an area we still consider dicey at night, look for the valet on Front Street, around the corner from the restaurant entrance. It's \$10 for three hours.

We're delighted to have chef Pflueger back in a local kitchen. Will this show have a good long run? So far, it looks like a hit.

Jonathan Pflueger's Currant American Brasserie (currantrestaurant.com) serves lunch Monday-Friday and dinner nightly at 140 West Broadway, downtown. Call 619-702-6309. ■

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