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A new direction at North End Grill

Danny Meyer's latest is creative and vibrant, but a work in progress

It's freezing at the checkroom as I surrender my coat at Danny Meyer's new North End Grill, but the bright welcome from a couple of cute young things at the podium is instantly warming. The glow of the open kitchen strikes me as cunningly bright but not glaring. I love the snappy black-and-white fixtures, like umbrellas overhead. So I'm already smiling.

Six of us are seated at a small round, facing a wall of rough plank—reclaimed Wyoming snow fence. I feel myself captured, drawn into the fantasy here, the spiff of the design, the cozening Pan Am stewardess airs of the servers, as if I'm in a time warp. It's contagious. Some of us are contemplating Scotch by the wee dram (1.5 ounces) from the house's extensive collection.

We settle on \$13 creations instead, my friends drawn to Scotch cocktails: a Blood and Sand with cherry brandy and orange juice, and a Gaslight, with Drambuie and curaçao. My wonderful Jack Rose, though, is not boozy enough to blur my impression that chef Floyd Cardoz's vividly creative menu is definitely still a work in progress: remarkable ups, alarming downs, too-long waits for the food, an excess of saltiness.

I can't quite decide how I feel about the onion rings we order from the bar menu. The frying is perfect; the pebbly batter stays glued. Something about the flavor gives me pause. But I'm clear on the pumpkin-crab soup—not enough pumpkin essence. I'm put off by the almost leathery dough of the fiercely salty bacon/maple-syrup pizza from the bar menu. Still, hamachi sashimi has seaweed salad alongside. I force myself to put back a third forkful so my pals can taste, too. Shaved turnips, fennel and pecorino salad with black-pepper vinaigrette make a brilliant toss of salad, and I'm pleased with my choice of escarole, endive and radicchio tossed with blood orange and Marcona almonds as my entrée.

Cardoz himself comes to our table just after the halibut with pine nuts, green raisins and clams. "I cooked that for you," he says to me. And indeed the fish is delicately cooked, just the way I like it. He seems clearly exhausted and agrees with our companion, Barry Wine, chef of the fabled Quilted Giraffe, that the complicated grill-oven takes time to master.

Of the five egg dishes catering to our town's love affair with them, a



SUSHI-BAR SPARKLE: Hamachi sashimi

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👤👤👤 I can't wait to return.
👤👤 I will definitely go back.
👤 I'll let them simmer awhile.
NO HATS Never again.

slightly-too-cooked coddled egg riding on grits stuffed with peekytoe crab and bacon is the best of the three I tasted. The slow-poached egg with paddlefish caviar and bottarga needs another element to be more than just assembled ingredients. And the lobster omelet is, surprisingly, just a lobster omelet. Roasted mushroom and kale "Risoato"—got that? Oats, not rice—tastes healthy, but at a price.

I suspect the cayenne and paprika, maybe even the dried mango powder, intensifies the saltiness of the Thrice-Fried Spiced Fries. These are crisp on the outside and soft within. I probably ate 20 or so trying to decide why they weren't outrageously fabulous. Not crisp enough, maybe. They must be eaten hot.

Sticky toffee pudding with ginger ice cream is our table's favorite dessert over the rather restrained North End Eccles cake, with Montgomery cheddar in too-thin slices alongside. The lemon meringue pie looks like Björk floating away on an ice floe. I want more lemon intensity and don't need the candied almonds.

Of course I'll be back. It's exciting that Cardoz is inspired by the challenge of cooking beyond the Indian fusion of Tabla. He needs to outmuscle the temperamental custom stove. He needs candid tasters and time.

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