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Food

PUTTING PARKDALE ON THE DINING MAP

By Ryan Jennings
PHOTOGRAPH BY COLIN DEWAR

Cowbell

RATING: Good
ADDRESS: 1564 Queen W.
PHONE: 416-849-1095

DINNER FOR TWO: \$110*
HOURS: 5-10pm Tue-Thu, 5-11pm Fri-Sat
WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBLE: Yes.
RESERVATIONS: Recommended.

You've long been able to find a fantastic veggie roti in Parkdale – or a bar that serves \$2 beer – but until Chef Mark Cutrara opened Cowbell last month, pulling up a chair in a French bistro on the strip of Queen West-West-West was not something locals could do. Or ever thought they wanted to do. But Cutrara's not only created a locavore's crack den (churning butter in the basement, curing and smoking his own meat), he's done it in a very Parkdale way – charming but not ostentatious.

Two substantial chalkboards display the day's offerings of naturally raised organic meats, house-smoked delicacies and local produce. He's even doing his own butchering. Cutrara could do himself a favour and proclaim these facts more obviously than in a small footnote at the bottom of the board.

First courses could be bigger and Cutrara could charge more. Chewy and moist house-cured bresaola arrives tucked into a log cabin of crispy polenta fries with chipotle aioli for dipping (\$6). Cutrara's whimsical take on breakfast is simple and flawless. Tempura-fried green tomatoes (\$10) get topped with a poached free-range egg and a scattering of sautéed pork belly bits. But tender and pink smoked trout (\$8) seems skimpy on a mountain of sweet corn and grape tomato salsa; its pickled-perch accompaniment adds wonderful tang but distracts with its chewy texture. Much better is the country-style terrine (\$9), chunky with flecks of black pepper and pistachio and served simply with *cornichons*, mustard and slices of baguette.

Mains show signs of finesse but need refining. A fatty pork shoulder chop (\$26) could use a touch more seasoning but its celery root and diced apple topping, caramelized onions, baby beets and thin peels of pickled zucchini are an award-winning combo. Perfectly cooked veal sirloin with tomato, corn and sautéed rapini is utterly divine, though for \$27 the four-ounce portion seems meagre. Beef pot pie (\$18) could also use a touch more flavour, but its flaky croissant-like crust would bring grandma to tears. And while a rubbery-skinned chicken Ballotine (\$25) is shameful – and pricy – its spiced lentil and buttery green bean accompaniments reinforce Cutrara's fine attention to veggies.

Unfortunately, desserts (all \$7) don't redeem. Strawberry soup, a.k.a. puréed strawberries doused in sparkling wine at the table, is downright ridiculous. And pre-made crepes stuffed with strawberry, rhubarb and plums capture a casual feeling but lack the elegance of Cutrara's other dishes. He does win with one – a silky and dense milk chocolate pot au crème.

Just the opening of Cowbell put Parkdale on the dining map. Now if Cutrara can churn out a few edits, he may very well be able to turn his bistro into a bona fide destination, replete with elegance and down-home charm – 100 per cent organic, of course.

* PRICE INCLUDES APPETIZERS, ENTREES, DESSERT AND WINE AND TAXES AND TIP

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