

Food for Thought: Beyond Room Service --- Flexible and Relaxed, Some Hotel Restaurants Break From Tradition

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

I've always found hotel restaurants to be stiff and boring with unimaginative food too reminiscent of catering schools and service that makes lone diners feel awkward. They invariably send me fleeing back to the comforts of room service. But there comes a time when you can't face eating another club sandwich with Larry King droning sycophantically in the background.

One of the best new hotel restaurants in Asia is also the best value. Biscotti in the Regent in Bangkok has overturned most of the conventions of restaurants in expensive five-star hotels. It's cheerful, relaxed and uncompromisingly Italian. Indeed, it is one of the few hotel restaurants in the region with both an Italian chef and manager. This is a sleek Armani-designed Italy, not the mythical peasant land of check table cloths and straw-wrapped Chianti bottles. But it remains informal, the sort of place where you can wear shorts and sandals and read a newspaper at Sunday lunch without being frowned upon. It is also a bargain by hotel standards: Three courses without wine came in under \$20. The wine list is the only lapse here. It is breathtakingly expensive and could offer more by the glass.

What sets Biscotti apart is simple, robust food that comes with a real confidence about its quality. On my first visit, bread appeared with a bowl of gray mush, a brave choice for any restaurant. It looked disgusting but the smoky mushroom pate tasted delicious smeared on the excellent bread. The menu -- a range of pastas, pizzas and salads -- comes closer to the straightforward, bold flavors of food in Italy than the dumbed-down versions in most restaurants in Asia. Here the tastes of good olives, anchovies, pasta and cheese are allowed to shine.

FULL TEXT

"Table for how many?" asks the maitre d' with a supercilious flicker of an eyebrow. "One," I answer.

"Table for one," he announces to the room in a booming voice that functions as the contemporary equivalent of a leper's bell. I'm led to an under-lit distant table hidden behind a pillar where all but one place of the settings are removed with an ostentatious flourish and much clattering of silverware. It is just the first of about 50 reminders that I'm eating alone.

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It is rare to find a hotel restaurant for which you can feel any affection or loyalty. But hotel managers are finally trying to inject some personality and imagination into the stolid world of hotel dining. Now restaurants are catching up with the way people live and eat -- with more flexibility and informality and much better food.

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Biscotti combines a number of hotel-restaurant trends that are part of renovations following the lean years of the economic crisis. It has an open kitchen that creates an atmospheric noise in even the emptiest restaurant and breaks down barriers between patrons and staff. The restaurant has a chef's table overlooking the kitchen with a special list of dishes. It also has a communal table, which is a nice idea, allowing those eating alone to choose a more sociable situation.

Mezza 9 at the Grand Hyatt in Singapore has taken the concept of open kitchens to an extreme. A Western grill, a Japanese yakitori grill, a Cantonese kitchen and even many of the storage units and refrigerators are all bared in the 400-seat restaurant. Throw in a martini-and-cigar bar, a wine shop, a patisserie, a wine cellar and a crustacean bar and you have an extraordinary mix.

What could be an overwhelming jumble actually works well. The seats around the open kitchens provide entertainment for anyone eating alone, although sitting by the grill I nearly ended up with shrapnel wounds from a cook vigorously hacking lobsters in half. Mezza 9 is really a reconfigured upmarket hotel coffee shop, but one that delivers its food with such panache I forgot I was eating in a hotel. Its steaks, of which there is a large choice, are particularly good and come with vast bowls of unctuous, delicious mashed potatoes that cast aside any hotel restaurant misapprehensions.

Mezza 9 has an excellent but expensive wine list and a well-considered selection by the glass. It is the sort of restaurant that somehow simultaneously can cater to a vast range of different diners -- from big groups of women drinking colorful cocktails to groups of executives attending the Singapore Air Show and spending serious money on wine. At the same time, if you're on your own and want good but pricey European, Chinese or Japanese comfort food in a cheerful setting, it can accommodate you. Service from the young staff is still very shaky but this is a new and busy restaurant and the problems will doubtless be ironed out.

Somehow Jesters at the Peninsula Hotel in Bangkok hasn't managed to shake off that stuffy hotel feel. It has a spectacular setting, albeit in a bad location on the wrong side of the Chao Phraya River, a funky aeronautical design, and some interesting but rather underflavored food and absolutely no atmosphere. The name doesn't help; I spent the meal with the lingering fear that a man in a stupid pointed hat with bells might try to entertain me.

Jesters bills itself as an "ultra-trendy eatery," a dangerous claim to make if you are actually very mid-1990s. It would

do better by shedding its pretensions and lowering its prices to attract a larger, younger crowd. It is a space that needs to be filled with noise and atmosphere if it is not to feel chilly and contrived.

The food is a mix of Asian with some Hawaiian inflection, although fear not, that doesn't mean canned pineapple is added to every dish. The crab cakes were well put together but lacked an edge. A circle of tuna was cooked to rare perfection but again lacked a memorable touch. Indeed all the food is technically good but feels as though it has been approved by committee. It needs a clearer vision and more aggressive spicing. Only the tea-flavored creme brulees stuck in my mind for the interesting tannic edge to the sweetness. The wine list is expensive, starting at about \$47 and moving up rapidly. Service was like an unnerving long-distance relationship, with bursts of slightly intrusive enthusiasm followed by long periods of neglect.

Cilantro at the MiCasa Hotel Apartments in Kuala Lumpur has been around for a few years but is still a refreshing contrast to other hotel restaurants in the Malaysian capital. A stripped-down but cosily plush dining room serves nuanced fusion food with influences from around the region. Chef Ken Hon worked in Australia for years and also in Lafite, the Shangri-La's French restaurant, and deftly weaves different techniques and ingredients. A mixed starter platter was a little disappointing, though; it was in need of bolder flavors. The selection of wines by the glass is conservative and the full wine list focuses too much on prestige bottles over interesting cheaper wines.

The lessons for hotels in the more successful of the new restaurants is that diners don't want a stiff, formal atmosphere or gimmicky themes. They want relaxing, cheerful places to eat and authentic cuisine that comes from a singular vision.

Please send comments to awsj.food@awsj.com

Where to Find It

Biscotti at the Regent Bangkok, 155 Rajadamri Road, Bangkok. Tel: 66 2 255-5443.

Mezza 9 at the Grand Hyatt Singapore, 10-12 Scotts Road, Singapore. Tel: 65 738-1234

Jesters at the Peninsula Bangkok, 333 Charoennakorn Road, Klongsan, Bangkok. Tel: 66 2 861-2888

Cilantro at MiCasa Hotel Apartments, 368B Jalan Tun Razak, Kuala Lumpur. Tel: 603 261-8833

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Business indexing term:	Subject: Restaurants Hotels & motels; Industry: 72251 : Restaurants and Other Eating Places 72111 : Hotels (except Casino Hotels) and Motels
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Subject:	Restaurants; Hotels & motels; Wines; Chefs; Food
Publication title:	Asian Wall Street Journal; Victoria, Hong Kong
Pages:	P5
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	2000
Publication date:	Mar 31, 2000
Section:	Personal Journal
Publisher:	Dow Jones & Company Inc.
Place of publication:	Victoria, Hong Kong
Country of publication:	United States, Victoria, Hong Kong
Publication subject:	Business And Economics--Banking And Finance
ISSN:	03779920
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	NEWSPAPER
ProQuest document ID:	315462681
Document URL:	http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/newspapers/food-thought-beyond-room-service-flexible-relaxed/docview/315462681/se-2?accountid=11311
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Database:	ProQuest One Business, ProQuest Central

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