

08/20/09 - My Weekend in Chicago

MK Restaurant, Chicago

Of Rats and Rabbits

In August we were in Chicago for a wedding and wanted to dine alone since our anniversary was approaching. It was not by mere chance or a hotel concierge recommendation that we found our way to MK Restaurant, but by my diligent foodie research on the Internet.

MK restaurant is named after its chef and owner Michael Kornik, and is one of Chicago's best. We arrived at the restaurant after a short walk from our hotel, its location close by coincidence. The moment we walked in my expectations rose, looking at the thoughtful interior, described in one website as sensuous minimalism. The restaurant's multilevel, reclaimed warehouse look, with exposed rafters, and large gabled skylight ceiling gave a very Chicago-like feeling to the place.

Michael Kornik is a classically trained chef, who adores using seasonal local produce and a live charcoal grill. The restaurant boasts an extensive wine list and creative cocktails that compliment the food. Our extremely attentive waiter and assistant started off the evening with an amuse bouche of fresh pea soup in a demitasse cup with a fresh herb garnish. The bread basket contained whole grain bread and rich brioche-like slices. A very fruity green olive oil accompanied the bread.

While we waited for our appetizer we ordered a mojito made with pureed, sweet, honeydew melon in place of the usual sugar syrup, we also tried a fresh pink grapefruit martini with a secret ingredient. We drank our cocktails with a tower of tuna tartar, chopped Nicoise olives, a dollop of celery remoulade, and a drizzle of a flavorful olive oil. Next, to arrive was a bowl of roasted artichoke soup with olive tapenade and dried lemon peel garnish. The soup contained no dairy or meat, yet was thick and delicious with chunks of artichoke heart hiding in the velvety puree.

Our waiter, Sergio insisted we try the Restaurant's signature fries, so along with our main course he brought a cone of fries with garlic aioli on the side. Peeled and sliced from scrubbed potatoes with the skins on, hot from the oil, my calorie counting resistance crumbled like dry bread crumbs. They went well with the charcoal grilled 'bone in' halibut with a fresh corn relish containing heirloom cherry

tomatoes and other vegetables sautéed in brown butter. The halibut was succulent, enhanced by the corn relish with its nutty brown butter flavor. Roasted zucchini flowers as a side dish were a change from the usual fried stuffed blossoms and they were wonderful.

The sommelier Patrick prevailed on me to try two wines he was previewing. A full bodied Italian Tocai Chardonnay from the Piedmont area of Italy, almost gold in color, with stone fruit overtones. The other was a light crisp Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc with very citrus overtones. Both wines complemented the fish.

Although there were many yummy sounding choices on the desert menu, my husband and I split an innovative and inspired desert from the pre-fix menu with our coffees. A ½ snowball dome of apricot sponge cake sat on a bed of sautéed red plums surrounded by circles of nectarines. On the side of the plate was a scoop of pluot sorbet, sitting on a mound of brown butter emulsion that tasted like caramel.



We lingered a bit longer and walked back to the hotel in the pleasant evening air. As we cut through a walkway between buildings on some kind of university campus, I spied a rabbit in the grass next to our path. The startled rabbit hesitated a moment and then quickly scampered off into the bushes. Not more than 2 yards further, a large rat ran, directly across our path. Was this some kind of omen? What are the chances of a rabbit and a rat crossing your path within seconds of each other?

I have chosen to put a positive spin on it, since rats are known to bring good fortune and prosperity, along with their imagination, cleverness and generosity in the Chinese Zodiac. Rabbits can be symbols of cleverness, sweetness, and light. I will view this encounter as a good end to a wonderful and delicious evening.

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