

Restaurant Review: Frank's Kitchen

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Aaron Lynett/National Post

Frank Parhizgar at this College Street bistro: an unpretentious classic.

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Frank's Kitchen

588 College St., 416-516-5861

3.5 stars

Like Diogenes, I've been searching for an honest man — translation, an honest restaurant. You know, a place without 'tude, politics, Goracle pronouncements, loud music — in a couple of words, jus' good cooking. I've been luckier than Diogenes — or perhaps just not so cynical — to have found Frank's Kitchen among the flim-flammery along the carny coast of College Street.

For the past few months, Frank's Kitchen has been creeping into local consciousness the right way, through word of mouth. It's a prim little townhouse of a storefront that opens into a long bar, skinny restaurant, open kitchen. Decor is softly neutral. Chairs: comfortable. Music track: inoffensive. Service: informal and informed.

Chef/owner Frank Parhizgar, French trained (last stop, Centro), presents a concise classic menu and cooks it with nuanced authority. The restaurant is wonderfully anachronistic. It exudes leisureliness — in the best way. We sit in the window and sip a glass of McManis Chardonnay (\$13), nibble homemade breads, sip a teaser of a shot glass of cool cucumber and sweet avocado accompanied by a crisp ball of goat cheese. Plenty of time to mull the carte, which, glory be, contains surprises.

Oysters Rockefeller! The dish is unapologetically rich — oysters baked in their shells with spinach, hollandaise, bacon — and oozes the effulgence of the 19th-century robber barons. It was created by Antoine in New Orleans after the chef couldn't find enough local snails for the hors d'oeuvre. I scoff down six oysters and feel as expansive as a millionaire — till I see the cost, a trifling \$13. My companion does handsomely, too. For \$14, the finest marbled, transparent beef carpaccio with a little torchon of foie gras, French bean salad with truffle and shallot vinaigrette.

We are tempted by Champagne risotto with truffled pecorino cheese (\$17) but plump instead for a shared plate of homemade gnocchi in Gorgonzola cream with pancetta (\$15). Hmm. The gnocchi are light and small and crisped and bathed in a properly salty sauce — Parhizgar is a nimble saucier. Still, they don't banish the memory of the best gnocchi in town. Until late last year, before the resident magician went back to Milan, Trio at Yonge and Lawrence was serving ethereal clouds of gnocchi. No word yet on a replacement.

Spirits continue to rise with the grace note of sangria sorbet with a grape.

For entrees, we skip a milk-fed lamb orgy — rack, loin, braised shoulder with a syrah reduction (\$27) — for marigenous dishes — in a word, fish. Yes, says the totally prepped waiter, who has charm enough to sell waterfront property in Arizona, the catch of the day is as near to the sea as could be. The grilled, crusted red snapper is agreeably, mildly undercooked and comes with that ode to summer, deep-fried zucchini blossom, a gentle bath of fish stock jus and an irresistible crisp breaded scallop (\$26). The grilled whole lobster (\$26) is just as delicious, with sweet corn tortellini in the tenderest lemon butter sauce with a spicy chorizo/fennel salad and sautéed spinach. Just one

question. What happened to the tomalley, the greenish lobster liver, which enriches the taste of the sweet lobster meat?

Dessert is a caramel peach tart (\$8) but it is upstaged by a couple of warm sugared beignets — as we crunch 'em, we ponder an anomaly: College Street is the lucky dip of strips, a revolving door of restaurants. And yet, three small restaurants near Clinton Street are now among my faves — Sidecar Bar and Grill, with its Sunday-Wednesday \$25 prix fixe, L.A.B.'s haute vegetarian and now Frank's Kitchen, all unpretentious and welcoming.

Evening ends but how do we get out of here? College between Bathurst and Dufferin is closed to traffic for an Italian street celebration. Isn't this excessive? A couple of blocks perhaps, but a half mile? The TTC is a good walk away. Cabs are non-existent. Half an hour later, a major fire broke out a few blocks away. Another diner trying to get out?

No wheelchair access. Dinner for two, food plus tax, \$110.