

Plenty to rave about at Allium

Often-good little place has become reliably great

Much to celebrate this summer, but chilled air at Allium restaurant is top of list. They've installed an air conditioner — brand new, reportedly — and Allium, on many levels, is cooler than ever.

Entering its eighth year of service to the Holland Avenue neighbourhood — interrupted for a few months by a fire in 2007 — Allium is firing on all cylinders these days. It has been a few years since I last took it for a spin, and I'm very glad to be back. What was once an often-good little restaurant has become a reliably great one.

A bit of post-fire redecoration has given a bunker-like space a more modish look. Lighting has improved, and a plethora of evening candles bolsters the atmosphere. And what was in 2007 a new thing in the Allium repertoire has, four years later, become a popular fixture. Monday tapas nights were a clever concept when they were first introduced — a way to get bums in seats on a traditionally slow night — but with our affection for small-plate dining showing no sign of lagging (and these such winning little dishes), Allium is now packed on Mondays.

There aren't many restaurants in this city for which reservations are required on a Monday. Allium is an exception.

We booked last-minute but lucked out with the last table at 8:30 p.m. A parade of delicious plates was our reward. Chef Arup Jana bothers with details of product, and the goodness of the raw



MIKE CARROCCETTO, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Arup Jana, chef and owner of Allium, with foie gras tapas on grilled toast at his restaurant on Holland Avenue.

materials is obvious, their implementation splendid.

The best of the bunch? Tough to say — foie gras on grilled, oiled toast, perhaps, with an apple compote and a sprinkling of Maldon salt: simple and superb. A pretty plate of Mariposa heirloom tomatoes of various shapes and colours — some sliced, some halved, some left whole, all bursting with sunny flavour — came with a scattering of garlic chips, a lemoned fingerling potato salad and some creamy-tart goat cheese drizzled with a honey vinaigrette.

Shrimp lollipops were crunchy treats, the sweet meat wrapped in tempura. On the side, a purple

carrot salad spiked with jalapeño and drizzled with truffled honey.

Still more good stuff: steak tartare accented with minced chives and pickled garlic scapes; flat iron steak with pickled carrots and a chipotle aioli; and the seriously diverting picnic food of truffled macaroni and cheese with a crunchy roof of buttery breadcrumbs. Oh yes, and frites. Well worth the indulgence.

Lunch at Allium was less unequivocally terrific, though it began with a first-class soup — a creamy purée of cauliflower and onion, a flourish of purple basil microgreens and a drizzle of chive oil its pretty accents — and ended with a marvellous lemon tart. But the

Allium

87 Holland Ave., 613-792-1313
www.alliumrestaurant.com

Access: Steps to entrance and to washrooms

Price: Starters, \$9 to \$11; main dishes, \$20 to \$29

Open: Monday for evening tapas; Tuesday to Friday for lunch and dinner; Saturday, dinner only. Closed Sunday

salads in between were only OK. Thickish slices of albacore tuna were displayed on a wooden board and looked lovely with a scatter-

ing of marigold petals, cubes of watermelon, dabs of goat cheese, slivers of radish, but — here was the trouble — there was nothing to unite the dish. A hint-of-lime and honey sticky drizzle wasn't enough. It was all pleasant, but the marriage wasn't solid.

As well, my vision for the mushroom salad was a pile of mixed mushrooms. What arrived was a pile of greens with a scattering of mushroom (enoki mostly) buried in lettuce. The vinaigrette was too strong for the delicate 'shrooms.

Again, it wasn't a bad dish, just not up to Allium standards. But the banoffee pie, on the menu for all of Allium's eight years, is.