

THE HILL



Chocolate: It's what's for dinner

By Kris Kitto

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In the holiday chocolate wasteland of M&M/Mars and Russell Stover, an oracle has arisen.

This Valentine's Day, Mio Restaurant Executive Chef Nick Stefanelli has taken a Willy Wonka-like approach to the day's most common ingredient, blending and grating, melting and spreading, crushing and cooking various forms of chocolate for his four-course special menu.

For those looking for a cherry cordial, head to your nearest Hallmark.

Anyone else who wants to celebrate Valentine's Day eating chocolate in non-traditional ways, get to know Stefanelli. He serves a lovers' meal of diver scallops roasted in cocoa butter with a ginger vanilla foam; white chocolate risotto with sweetbreads and chicory fluid gel; duck with chocolate mole, creamed grits and radicchio; and toasted chocolate brioche with Nutella and a dark-chocolate sorbet.

"When you come in, be open to trying new things," says the 28-year-old chef, whose regular menu includes maple syrup-braised sweetbreads with whole grain-mustard ice cream and gnocchi made from potatoes roasted in hay. "That's the whole purpose of going to eat out."

At a recent private tasting of Mio's Valentine's Day menu, Stefanelli said he wanted to avoid the typical "aphrodisiac foods" many restaurants pull together this time of year.

"We wanted to do something completely different," he said. So Stefanelli and his staff began kicking around ideas on how to incorporate chocolate into several savory dishes rather than reserving the ingredient for dessert.

"This is kind of like our first go at trying the savory-sweet," he said. The challenge, he said, is to bend most diners' strongly held belief that chocolate only plays well in sweet dishes.

The question was, "How are we going to integrate chocolate into every course where it's not a sugar, diabetic, anaphylactic shock?" he said. "We didn't want to have the

overpowering sweetness, so we broke it down to the elements of the chocolate: cocoa nibs, the cocoa butter, using chocolate in rice and folding it in.”

Stefanelli and his chefs experimented with the amount of white chocolate in the risotto dish so that the flavor wouldn't overpower but would be detectable.

“We added and added and added and added until we felt like we reached the balance of cheesy, creamy sweetness,” he said.

True to his word, the white chocolate risotto pairs well with the sweetbread, providing a smooth texture and pleasing taste that doesn't make you think “chocolate” but does make you think “rich.” The risotto's other ingredients are butter and parmesan cheese.

As Stefanelli explained of the white chocolate, “you pick it up, but it dissipates and disappears.”

Stefanelli isn't afraid to play with other dishes. The day of the tasting, he came into the restaurant and decided the risotto entree needed a bitter element. He came up with the chicory fluid gel, pureeing the herb with a special gelatin, coffee, sugar and water and dabbing the resulting dark sauce in a circular pattern on the plate.

He originally planned to serve the risotto with rabbit but decided to go with sweetbreads, the thymus gland of a calf, because it pairs well with sweeter flavors, he said.

In his ongoing experimentation, Stefanelli changed his third course from beef to duck, which he serves with a savory chocolate mole sauce and cocoa nibs mixed with fleur de sal. The juicy, gamey duck is complemented nicely by the grainier mole. The nibs, which are roasted and crushed cocoa beans, are more reminiscent of peanuts than a Hershey bar. The grilled radicchio maintains a crisp texture and proves a pungent palate-cleanser. Stefanelli was still tweaking the first course but clarified that the cocoa butter he will use in the scallop dish will be food-grade, and not the stuff you find in Keri lotion.

His pastry chef, Tom Wellings, created the brioche, Nutella and chocolate sorbet dessert. He credits much of his inspiration from the cooking traditions of his ancestry (Stefanelli's mother is Greek, and his father is Italian).

He also picked up several tips at his previous restaurants. Stefanelli, a native Washingtonian, was chef de cuisine at Fiamma in New York City and sous chef at Maestro in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Tysons Corner, Va., before taking over Mio. He graduated from L'Academie de Cuisine in Gaithersburg, Md., in 2001.

Stefanelli knows diners might initially balk at the idea of eating chocolate alongside seafood, meat or rice. All he asks is that they open their minds to something new.

“Getting people to eat it — some people are all for it, some people are very reserved,” he said. “But once they try it, they're like ‘Wow, it's the best thing I've had.’ ”