

DINING OUT Lesley Chesterman

# XO is divine in every way

WITH MICHELE MERCURI leading the kitchen, the opulent dining room finally hits perfection

**XO Le Restaurant**

★★★★  
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355 St. Jacques St. W.  
(in the St. James Hotel)  
Phone: 514-841-5000

Website:  
www.xolestaurant.com  
Open: Lunch weekdays  
11:30 a.m.-2 p.m.; dinner  
daily 6 p.m.-10 p.m.

Licensed: Yes  
Credit cards: All major cards  
Wheelchair access: No  
Parking: Free valet  
Vegetarian-friendly: Yes  
Reservations:  
Recommended

Price range: Starters \$14-\$24; main courses \$24-\$38; desserts \$10. Lunch-time two-course table-d'hôte \$26, three courses, \$29. Seven-course tasting menu \$79 (with wine \$149).



PHOTOS: JOHN KENNEY THE GAZETTE

Newcomer Michele Mercuri (right) with sommelier Martin Lefebvre: A major wow.

You know what's really on the "out" list these days? Ostentation. This hit home big time as I sat in XO's plush dining room, a room known as "Banker's Hall." Perched on a Louis the somethingth chair while fingering the Christofle silverware, guilt swept over me. Suddenly I felt not like a restaurant reviewer wearing a decade-old cardigan, but a Merrill Lynch CEO rethinking the office decor or an AIG exec planning where to stash the bonus. With visions of revolutionaries storming the gates, I hid behind my menu and turned down the waiter's suggestion of a flute of Champagne in favour of a glass of sparkling water.

Having been to this the glam restaurant in the posh St. James Hotel twice previously, I knew what I was getting into. When I say glam, I mean sweeping staircases, massive chandeliers and tables adorned with white linen, fresh flowers and the finest china and crystal around. Wow.

Some might consider a dinner in such surroundings at this time of recession in poor taste. But I will defend fine dining no matter how tough the times, for we are all free to spend our hard-earned dollars on any necessity or vice, such as a celebration, when a fancy meal and heavy pampering are a favourite choice to mark an occasion. Yet, more impor-

tant is the evolution of cooking itself. Yes, we all appreciate cheap eats and bistro fare. But for cooking to evolve, we need chefs willing to take a risk in preparing luxury ingredients for discerning customers. And I say risk because at a time when everyone is gripping their savings tight, high-end restaurants have become a risky proposition.

That said, I entered XO expecting the worst. Opened in 2005, this restaurant first made a splash under European chef Jérôme Ferrer. But when Ferrer left soon after, the kitchen fell on hard times. Despite the swish setting, at my first visit this potential four-star restaurant barely got two stars. In 2007, chef Eric Gonzalez took over; yet XO failed to live up to its potential once again. The French chef's fussy fare epitomized just the sort of complex nouvelle cuisine being shunned in favour of more casual eats.

Happily, instead of hauling the silverware off to cold storage, XO polished it and hired yet another talented chef, 30-year-old newcomer Michele Mercuri.

The name might ring a bell. Mercuri's cousin Joe is the chef/owner of the reputed fine-dining destination Brontë. Having worked as Brontë's sous-chef for six years, Michele has a style similar to Joe's: contemporary cuisine with a strong Italian base and drop-dead

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gorgeous plate presentations.

The ingredients he favours at XO are locally sourced and luxurious, as in foie gras, duck, deer, scallops and lobster. Prices have been lowered, not bistro-inexpensive, mind you, but with main courses capped at \$38 and a three-course lunch menu set at \$29, prices here rival those of many trendy establishments around town.

At XO, however, the food is miles better. I'm usually not one to gush, but I was seriously wowed by Mercuri's cooking. After an amuse-bouche consisting of mackerel with melon, I knew it was game-on, because I usually hate mackerel but I loved this meaty nugget of white fish with a hint of licorice provided by a sprig of chervil.

Then the starters hit the table and I sat back in awe of the beauty of it all.

To my right, a friend dug in to a tumbler containing jumbo shrimp layered with a

ginger and yogourt sabayon, fennel, pomegranate and a blood-orange granita. With so many diverse colours, textures, tastes and temperatures, this dish lifted my olfactory senses out of the doldrums of winter braises.

The same could be said of the beef tartare. Tartares are commonplace on Montreal menus, but Mercuri's version has minced raw meat and slices of carpaccio as well as slivers of croutons, greens, chopped veal tongue, fresh hearts of palm and quail's egg, the whole laced with a light truffle vinaigrette. And snuggled in the middle was a cylinder of beef jelly, adding yet another texture and making it the tartare to end all tartares.

I also relished every bite of the octopus appetizer. Made with marinated and grilled octopus served in small mounds with chickpeas and lemon confit bathed in an emulsion made with garlic flower, this artful assembly provided yet another shining example of Mercuri's talents at reworking a dish.

Main courses were equally impressive. A duo of Gaspar milk-fed piglet consisted of braised belly and roasted loin paired with tender gnocchi and slices of crunchy Chinese broccoli. I have never been disappointed by this magical pork (from St-Canut Farms near Mirabel), and it delivered both taste and tenderness. I wasn't quite as wowed by the accompanying

gnocchi, only because its grainy mustard/foie gras sauce overpowered the meat.

Yet, the next two dishes were flawless. A lasagna, described as "free form" consisted of loose layers of duck confit and lobster meat flavoured with lobster emulsion and stracchino cheese. Talk about gorgeous! And then there was the Boileau venison filet. Served with roasted Jerusalem artichokes, braised bok choy, and a frothy sauce (spuma) made with porcini mushrooms, this dish epitomized just what modern luxury dining should be all about: perfect technique, local ingredients and successful flavour combinations. Superb.

After a cheese course made up of local and imported varieties came dessert. First, a lemon semifreddo with coconut crumble and lemon curd that would have worked better without its black olive confit; second, a delicate chocolate millefeuille layered with mascarpone and served with a tiny rum-raisin cake and a delectable Tonka bean and milk chocolate sorbet; and finally - my favourite - a lukewarm and very frothy milk-chocolate mousse served in a glass and layered with hazelnut ice cream, milk foam, coffee, and the lightest sprinkling of curry powder. Yum!

Of course, XO has other strengths, chief among them faultless service - and, even better, wine service. Sommelier Martin Lefebvre's recommendations from XO's fabulous "carte" were all interesting (private imports one and all) and well-suited to our food. And then there are so many other little luxurious touches here, such as the large tables, the cushy chairs, homemade bread, free valet parking, the endlessly interesting surroundings. And who knew watching a waiter change napkins with silver tongs could be so enjoyable?

Dinner at XO offers luxury unparalleled in this city. No doubt it is a special-occasion restaurant, and no matter the economic outlook, special occasions are always worth celebrating. For a few hours during my meal here, I actually forgot there was a recession going on. And it felt kind of nice.