

RESTAURANTS



Photographs by ANNE CUNAGE, Los Angeles Times

GOOD FIT: Chef Tony DiSalvo's fresh, contemporary style suits both the hotel and Santa Monica's breezy spirit.

THE REVIEW

An overlooked gem

The food at Whist in the Viceroy Hotel is the best-kept secret in Santa Monica, but it's time the word got out.

S. IRENE VIRBILA
RESTAURANT CRITIC

Whist, the restaurant in Santa Monica's excruciatingly trendy Viceroy Hotel, opened with a bang in 2002. That was when Tim Goodell (Aubergine, Red Pearl) was doing the food, and it was startlingly good for a hotel restaurant. I remember pork belly filigreed with chile-laced caramel, skate wing with baby artichokes *barigoule*, potatoes au gratin for two and especially the desserts. If you ordered trifle, you got a whole bowl for the table, apricot pie, an entire pie. But foodies and a raucous bar scene didn't mix.

Goodell came and went, other chefs, too, and not one seemed to be able to retool the hotel's image into a gastronomic destination. One wonders why the management even kept trying. Then a few months ago they brought in yet another chef.

The restaurant's track record had been such that I was hesitant to run out to see what the new chef was doing. Instead, I put Whist on the back burner, fairly confident that nothing there had radically changed. But the more I heard about the new guy, Tony DiSalvo, the more I realized he just might be something different.

For one, he really does have quite the résumé. He must like California sunshine, too, because after working his way up to chef de cuisine at Jean Georges, one of New York's — and the country's — best restaurants, in 2004 he took a job as chef at Jack's La Jolla and when that folded, moved on to Santa Monica and the Viceroy.

DiSalvo is a keeper. He's turning out food in a fresh, contemporary style that suits both the hotel and the casual spirit of Santa Monica. But hardly anyone seems to know about it as yet.

Whist at the Viceroy Santa Monica ★★½



MAIN COURSE: The Jidori chicken entree.

LOCATION
Viceroy Santa Monica hotel,
1819 Ocean Ave., Santa
Monica; (310) 260-7507;
www.viceroyssantamonica.com

PRICE
Dinner appetizers, \$13 to \$18;
mains, \$24 to \$33; desserts,
\$11. Lunch salads and soups,
\$8 to \$14; sandwiches and
burgers, \$12 to \$16. Brunch
items, \$8 to \$18; desserts, \$9.
Corkage, \$35.

DETAILS
Open for dinner Sunday and
Monday from 6:30 to 10 p.m.
and Tuesday to Saturday from
6:30 to 11 p.m. Lunch is
served daily from 11 a.m. to 3
p.m. and brunch on Saturday
and Sunday from 7 a.m. to 3
p.m. Breakfast is served daily
from 7 to 11 a.m. Full bar. Valet
parking, \$10.

Rating is based on food,
service and ambiance, with
price taken into account in
relation to quality. ★★★★★:
Outstanding on every level.
★★★★: Excellent. ★★★: Very
good. ★: Good. No star: Poor
to satisfactory.

latimes.com/food

More on Whist

Go online for more images
of Whist and its signature
dishes.

short ribs. But you don't get to be chef at Jean Georges without being able to execute. And execute DiSalvo does.

On the plate, the dishes are so much better than they sound from the written descriptions. The plating is elegant, the flavors succinct and focused. I just wish there were more customers to experience what DiSalvo is doing in the kitchen. On the other hand, with the room nearly empty, it's actually quiet enough for conversation, something that's impossible when the restaurant is full.

I also find that the room's glossy Hollywood Regency décor has worn better than expected. Maybe it's the lighting, a mix of brass-trimmed pendant lamps and soothing candlelight, but the dining room, despite its emptiness, looks inviting.

A porcini mushroom soup features a velvety warm brown purée of mushrooms poured over a miniature landscape of chestnuts, speck, julienned apples and sage. Each bite offers a different palette of flavors, the tart apple against the forest flavors of the mushroom, the smoky speck against the autumnal chestnuts. Wonderful.

Little toasts topped with sashimi-grade bluefin tuna are arranged on the plate with fennel, olives and a brilliant saffron aioli to create a lovely composition. DiSalvo's sweet corn ravioli has an unusual delicacy, the slender packets tucked together with bites of pristine lobster, a little pancetta, fresh corn kernels, tomato and basil — and topped with a discreet and subtle foam.

Even something as ho-hum as arugula salad arrives on a wooden board, the emerald leaves strewn around with pear poached in Port, nuggets of blue cheese and touches of salami and the freshest walnuts, all in a gentle honey thyme vinaigrette.

The dinner menu fits on one page, with just a handful of main courses. Jidori chicken breast comes sheathed in a golden Parmesan crust, crispy on the surface and dense and moist underneath. You have a bite of chicken, a bite of poached egg, a bite of chanterelles in a smoky pancetta vinaigrette. Black truffles are supposed to be in there

DiSalvo's cooking demonstrates a great deal of finesse, including lamb medallions dusted with cardamom and served with tanga baby artichokes, very green olives and Marcona almonds for a Moroccan-Hispanic inflection. He brightens up braised beef short ribs with horseradish and the grassy taste of celery leaves, wakes up arctic char with a swirl of harissa oil and serves it with couscous and a few Manila clams.

The wine list includes an expansive selection of Champagne and sparkling wines for the bling crowd. Skip the Chardonnays for the more interesting white wine blends and unique varietals category, where you'll find Ostertag Sylvaner from Alsace, Aprémont from the Savoie and Livio Felluga Pinot Grigio from Italy. But only three whites are under \$50, while in the reds, there are more than half a dozen. I could find lots of bottles I'd want to drink on this list if I wanted to spend much more than \$50.

Keep in mind that on Monday and Tuesday nights, every wine from an edited, 80-bottle version of the wine list (sorry, no Champagnes or high-end Burgundies) is sold at \$25 per bottle. That includes wines that are normally priced at up to \$100. So drink up: This is a terrific deal. Desserts from pastry chef Brooke Mosley play well against the rest of the menu. Order the cheesecake and you get three oval scoops of barely sweetened ricotta cheese, the better to taste the quality of the cheese itself, set off by a swirl of huckleberry sauce, some toasted pine nuts and a hint of lemon and basil.

Tart diced apples, a little crumbled Point Reyes Blue and a few candied pecans are heaped into a buttery crust to make a rustic warm apple tart. The best part is the cider-infused caramel sauce. There's also a dreamy phyllo dough dessert of yogurt and figs accented with fragrant orange blossom honey and pistachios.

Service could be better. Waiters have a bad habit of interrupting to ask how everything "is tasting." It's not as if it's a real question demanding an honest

THE FIND

Japanese served

Horon's breaded, skewered and deep-fried tidbits add up to a delicious happy-hour meal.

C. THI NGUYEN

It's easy to stereotype Japanese food as a cult of all delicacy and lightness. But every culture must have its bar food, and so we have Horon, serving a barrage of skewered tidbits, all breaded, carefully deep-fried and lovingly arranged into architectural stacks.

There are fried chicken meatballs, fried pork belly, fried bacon-wrapped asparagus and fried lotus root. There are fried eel, fried meat-stuffed bell pepper and fried pumpkin. There are pitchers of beer, cups of sake and fruity cocktails. There are even fried ginkgo nuts. Horon is basically an endless, rolling, fully customizable happy hour.

"Everyone thinks Japanese food is crazy and expensive, but I don't think that's true to Japanese culture," says Hiro Miura, Horon's executive chef and show runner. Japan has cheap, tasty chow, Miura says, but it's little known in the West. "I thought, I should make a Japanese restaurant that has good food and a real price."

Crunch time

Kushiage restaurants are about fried things — sticks, and beer. The fryer doesn't give you tempura, a crispy cloud of batter. Instead, *kushiage* frying uses a crunchy coating based on panko — Japanese breadcrumbs, sort of the airy, crumbly cousin of those common Western bread crumbs.

Some of the stuff veers on a county fair's liberalization toward the boundaries of fryability. There's a curry-filled bread which are pretty much gooey and crunchy as you might imagine. There's the lunatic wonder of a fried mochi and cheese stick which turns out to be a cosmopolitan version of mozzarella stick, with a chewy, al dente layer of cheddar around a melty orange cheese center.

And *kushiage* is everywhere. Most of the menu is a dozen skewers, with a few \$2 skewers (fried skirt steak) or a couple of \$3 skewers including whole fried shrimp, complete with crunchy, tasty head and legs). Each skewer is a small tidbit, and most reasonable people will probably wash the whole skewer to themselves though those maniacs really have to try everything. You can split skewers, with a little cleverness and a borrowed butter knife. A beer and five skewers is a pretty good snack; 10 or 12 skewers probably glut most normal capacities for fried stuff.

At Horon, deep-frying is not a way to drown bad ingredients in overpowering batter. And, despite the inevitable repetitiveness of all fried-thing-on-a-stick, Horon is devoted