



Chef Joseph's: High-quality comfort food

by Neil Charles



Red grouper tempura sandwich with seaweed salad at Chef Joseph's. *Mark Lee*

If there were ever to be a James Beard award for enduring the slings, arrows and vagaries of the restaurant business and emerging unbowed, then the top place would most certainly go to Chef Joseph Heidenreich. Having survived restaurant closings, unimaginable illness and fickle business partners, Chef Joseph remains almost impossibly upbeat and optimistic about his life and career.

Six months ago, with the closure of his flagship restaurant, Agio, on Mass Ave, Joseph was facing the prospect of unemployment and an uncertain future. Amazingly and fortuitously, a series of unlikely events conspired to put this talented chef back in business at the helm of a striking and potentially spectacular establishment in the heart of downtown.

Situated, more or less, at the corner of Ohio and Delaware, The Connoisseur Room occupies the ground floor of one of Indy's iconic landmark buildings. Entering the restaurant, you could be fooled into thinking that you had walked onto the set of a baroque opera. Burgundy and crimson abounds from the plush carpets to the dramatic draperies. This luxurious color scheme is balanced by acres of wood which adds even more warmth to an already warm atmosphere; a striking, wall-to-wall bar dominates the back of the room and wine bottles are displayed behind glass in a floor-to-ceiling array. The overall impression is one of luxury and comfort, yet the friendly service and reassuringly unpretentious menu puts to rest any notions one might have that this might be overbearing or pompous.

Unconstrained by the former limitations of a strictly Italian menu, Chef Joseph is now able to let his imagination run wild. Open for lunch only, the kitchen offers a constantly rotating selection, featuring a handful of appetizers and main courses, drawing upon wide ranging global influences. Using locally-sourced ingredients wherever possible, including a number of amazing offerings from The Smoking Goose, the menu might feature anything from a duck meatball sandwich with pepper sauce to a perfectly roasted flounder, or Memphis-style pulled pork BBQ with Puerto Rican black beans.

This is very high quality comfort food with nicely judged portions, harmonious and yet

seemingly disparate ingredients, the kind of food you think might not work at first, but then turns out deliver an explosive punch of flavors and textures which less accomplished chefs might eschew out of sheer fear of failure.

With prices for small plates in the \$8-\$10 range, entrees from \$12-\$20, this is fine dining for a modest budget. Service is polished, informative and friendly. Evenings are currently reserved for special events.

Down the road, my hope is that Chef Joseph will reintroduce the three martini lunch, harking back to a day when America's greatest business minds made some of their best decisions over alcohol. Whether you want to stop in for a quick bite or linger for three hours, this is definitely on my Best Of list for lunchtime indulgence. On a personal note, I am absolutely delighted to see Chef Joseph back on the scene, especially at such a terrific establishment, and I'm sure there are many who will share my sentiments.

Tags: Dining Out, Chef Joseph Heidenreich, The Connoisseur Room, Italian, Agio, Review

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