

## TABLE MATTERS

# Luxurious Venetian Room pleases palate

The addition to the fine-dining market aims to make an elegant statement.

It occurred to me as I was dining in the luxuriant new Venetian Room that it has been a long time since a restaurant of this type opened locally.

By this type I mean an upscale, fine-dining restaurant that strives to offer an elegant experience of the highest level. I think you'd have to go back to 1994 when Manuel's on the 28th opened.

Oh, sure, there have been other fine dining restaurants to open since then — Delfino Riviera at the Portofino Bay Hotel comes to mind — but none that strove for that uppermost level and dared to utter those two little words: jackets requested.

To get an idea of the level of service and type of cuisine at the Venetian Room, think Arthur's 27, Dux or the dearly departed La Coquina (which now serves only Sunday brunch). And while the Venetian Room needs to do a little polishing, its food quality and service is every bit as good as those others.

The Venetian Room is a re-imagined space in the six-year-old Caribe Royale resort in extreme south Orlando.

The menu is under the supervision of chef de cuisine Khalid Benghallem, a former sous chef at Emeril's and the opening chef at Shula's Steakhouse in the Dolphin Hotel. The fare features all the standards you would expect to find in such a place — foie gras, crab cake, lamb rack, veal chop, etc. But the preparations are



anything but standard, and some are downright inspired.

Now, we may as well get this bit of business out the way right now: This place isn't cheap. Appetizers range from \$14 to \$17, and six of the seven entrees are more than \$30 (there's a \$28 chicken item). Is it worth it? Good lord, no — what is? But that said, the food is very good.

The lump crab cake (\$16), for example, was perhaps 99 percent crabmeat bound with just a bit of mustard and pan-fried perfectly. It was a shame that such a pure specimen of crab cake was served sandwiched between a slaw made with black sesame and savoy cabbage. Eating the slaw with the crab was the same as having more filler. I simply dusted the cabbage off and feasted on the meat.

I enjoyed the appetizer of foie gras (\$17), which had two seared lobes layered

**Silver setting.** The Venetian Room at the Caribe Royale Resort makes luxury and refined presentation part of the package.

### THE VENETIAN ROOM

**Where:** Caribe Royale, 8101 World Center Drive (CR 536 at CR 535), Orlando.

**When:** 6 - 10 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday.

**Reservations:** Accepted.

**Beverages:** Full bar.

**Entrees:** \$28-\$38

**Credit:** AE, D, DC, MC, V.

**Where to call:** 407-238-8000

#### Scott's recommendation:

It's a fine dining experience in the tradition of La Coquina or Arthur's 27. Pricy too. Start with a foie gras, splurge with the lobster bisque and move on to the beef tenderloin. Share the soufflé for dessert.

nice accompaniment. However, the dish also included rare duck breast meat, fanned across the plate that was as tough as jerky.

Instead of a tableside preparation, the Dover sole (\$32) was brought to the table already filleted. The fish itself was sufficiently firm, albeit a bit dry, even with the white wine, vermouth and butter sauce.

For dessert, the Grand Marnier soufflé (\$12) was nicely done, but the spiced roasted pear (\$9) was as hard as the mango was earlier. Black magic dome (\$11) had a bittersweet chocolate mousse cake on top of a chocolate platform with a hazelnut butterfly — a satisfying dessert.

The staff was well trained if not completely polished. The servers all had ear pieces that made them look as though they were with the secret service.

The wine list was well thought out and there are even some relatively moderate priced selections, although the wines by the glass were poured rather stingily.

The dining room is quiet and tastefully decorated. There are semi-secluded banquettes with etched glass dividers. Tables are done up in the requisite finery. Entrees are delivered on a cart under silver domes, but other courses are served and cleared on chintzy plastic trays.

The Venetian Room will no doubt appeal to business travelers looking to impress clients, but the owners are making a concerted effort to market the restaurant to locals. Those who have grown weary of the usual special occasion spots may well want to consider the Venetian Room for their next splurge.

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