

May 18, 2018

CATBIRD SEAT

1711 Division St.

Nashville

615-810-8200

3 diners @ 8:30 pm

Exec chef: Ryan Poli

Cuisine: Chef's menu. Very vege driven.

THE DRILL

There are **two seatings: 5:30 and 8:30 pm**; four nights a week (Wednesday through Saturday). Website says to make reservations 30 days out. Even though I was careful to do that, I could only score the 8:30 seating. **Pros and cons:** 5:30 is earlyish and I guess you can't linger because they have to turn the entire room for the 8:30 seating. 8:30 is late to start a 10-course dinner, including the final cookie jar. But the later seating might score a few extra courses.

Prepaid reservations; Grand Tasting Menu @ \$135 per person; **no parties larger than 4**. Wine pairings are available, but we didn't go that route. I requested a mezcal cocktail (it was smoky and spicy and pow!), my granddaughter had a glass of rosé, and Mr. D. had a glass of Israeli chardonnay (Mt. Hermon). We were all happy.

We are antsy waiting at home, so we decide to **take our chances on an early arrival**. Perhaps there will be a lounge or bar at Catbird. If we continue to sit around the house, we are going to fall asleep and miss this long-awaited meal altogether.

We are a good 45 minutes early, and **the only place to wait is in the Patterson House next door**. Actually, it's part of the same building, which appears to be an old house. Patterson is up an outdoor staircase, which leads to a porch and a small library-style waiting room. Catbird's Miss **UN**congeniality—more on her later—will call for us at 8:30. **Patterson House** is owned by the same company but it's a bar, a very **attractive bar**. **Velvet curtains** separate the hostess stand from the bar which has a beautiful bar, booth and barstool seating. All rather elegant. A small menu with **typical bar snacks**. **Way too typical for the elegance of the room**. **But we can't get in there anyway**. There is a waiting list. So we stake out a couple of chairs in the crowded anteroom. It seems half the people are

waiting to get into Patterson House, and the other half are early for the late Catbird seating.

When we first arrived and checked in at Catbird, the none-too-gracious gatekeeper told us the doors were locked until 8:30 and we couldn't wait in the closet-size entry room. Around 8:20, we drifted down to the Catbird entrance (a nondescript wood door) where a small group of diners began to congregate. Turns out that being the first to check in served us well. Each party is brought up separately by elevator. We were first on the list, and so our long wait was over and we were whisked into the elevator to travel one floor up.

THE PLACE

Catbird Seat has been around for seven years and Ryan Poli is its third chef. Poli is from the Chicago area where his credits include Mango, Le Français, Butter, Perennial, and Tavernita. He also did a stint at the French Laundry. Never went to culinary school. Completely self-taught.

There are 22-23 seats around a U-shaped table with the entire kitchen on display in the center of the horseshoe.

Ryan Poli and his brother/manager, Matthew, greet us and seat us. At first, I am annoyed by the ceremony of bringing each party up separately, I thought we would have to wait until the seating was complete for the meal to start. That's not the case. This strategy enables the staff to make each party feel special and once you are seated your evening begins. This also allows for individual pacing and you never feel as though you are at a course-by-course banquet.

And I ask, why is the place locked down? Ryan explains that after the first seating, they wash the entire space, seats, tables, kitchen. And they don't want people wandering around while that happens. OK. That makes sense, but the door girl needs a semester at a Charm School.

And I ask Ryan, if you are an employee, how much freedom do you have with the menu? "Complete freedom." These are guys are completely hands-off. Half the time I can't reach them if I wanted to.

SERVICE

Pretty much of a nonissue. This is like an extremely well orchestrated dinner party where everyone gets individual attention. No drink goes unpoured, no question unanswered, no napkin unfolded. Dishes and silverware replaced for every course.

And it's fun! A well-orchestrated dinner party where everyone feels at ease.

THE MEAL (see accompanying menu for full descriptions and suggested wine pairings)

Big eye tuna crudo

The tuna is stellar (soft but never mushy) and it's not ice cold, rather it's cool in temperature for a perfect landing in your mouth. Lemon verbena vinaigrette and crispy garlicky cilantro take this cliché right over the top.

Grilled white asparagus

The perfectly grilled stalks rest on fermented butter and are blanketed by a mountain of Russian osetra caviar. Asparagus is al dente and earthy tasting, butter is silky and light, caviar is . . . well it's caviar. Brilliant, luxurious combination.

Sunflower seed risotto

Speaking of earthy, Italian summer truffles have been shaved with abandon over the crackly seeds. Simple but overpowering. I could only eat a couple of bites. Not my favorite dish of the night.

Bloomsbury Farm Beets

The beets have been compressed in coffee, dehydrated, and cooked in caramel. White chocolate mousse and dehydrated olives are also involved. Somehow, each spoonful comes off as cloudlike. A hint of lime keeps everything ticking and as you get deeper in to the bowl, the flavors intensify. "Umami-focused," explains Matthew.

Wakame seaweed pasta

In between the perfectly chewy pasta and scallop bottargo (fish roe), there was a distinctly kinky flavor sensation going on. Ah. It was the yuzu kosho, an all-purpose Japanese condiment. Watch for this spice to start showing up Asian-leaning menus.

Two things happened about now:

- 1) I start actively worrying about pacing myself for the rest of the meal. Yes portions are small but flavors are dizzying and I don't know how much more I can handle.
- 2) Two very drunken diners agree with management that it's time for them to leave. They came in soused and noisy and things went downhill from there. When the door closed on them, everyone broke out in applause. It was a very bonding moment.

Grilled kampachi in dashi broth

Each diner is handed a bowl with a lip in the rim for sipping. The fish was incredibly tender and juicy, every bite perfect and not coasting, but the fresh peas soaking in the delicate dashi (not the least bit salty) stole the show. My granddaughter detected a ginger flavor, too. That can never be bad.

30-day dry aged strip loin

The menu says the beef is in an umami crust. That must be the fermented crowes. Really I don't know what that ingredient is (even after internet research) but it must have magical powers. And the morels (April to June) glorified the already pretty glorious meat. It was all so rich, I just couldn't finish my portion.

Buttermilk panna cotta

Not on the menu. Bonus palate cleanser. I licked the bowl and I don't even like panna cotta.

Bitter chocolate cremeux with kelp ice cream and strawberries

"I can't. I'm so full," I protested weakly.

Cookies in a jar

And then, as if to prove the entire staff still feels playful, after cooking "on stage" for six hours, each party receives its own cookie jar. Really cute crockery cookie jars. Like Oscar the Grouch, Winnie the Pooh, Cap'n Crunch, Pillsbury Doughboy. Ours was the Hamburglar. Filled with mini-size homey cookies.

This time I meant it, and Matthew packed up our cookies in a box to take home.

FINALE

After dinner, I chatted a bit with chef Poli, and the guy is happy as a pig in a smoker in the heart of Nashville. The menu does *not* change everyday, and he will bring back favorites. The menu evolves. Restaurant is open four nights a week. That's all he can manage! He ended on a corny note that rang oh-so sincere, "one team, one dream."

PERKS

Free valet parking. Unheard of at this level of dining. Any in Chicago, it's unheard of.

Detailed handwritten menus to take home.

Text from Ryan Poli

It was amazing having you and your family in for dinner. And thank you for the chat!!! Stay in touch. And let me know if Matthew and I can help with your pod cast at all.

