

e11even slams diners into boards

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By **Amy Pataki** Restaurant Critic

e11even

★ (out of 4)

Address: Maple Leaf Square, 15 York St., 416-815-1111, e11even.ca

Chef: David Isen

Hours: Monday to Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays, from 4 p.m.

Reservations: Yes

Wheelchair access: Yes

Price: Dinner for two with wine, tax and tip: \$240

Forget the stupid name. Forget the awkward service. Forget the sticker-shock prices.

The biggest problem with [e11even](#) is identity.

Is the new restaurant in Maple Leaf Square across from the Air Canada Centre an upscale roadhouse? A wine-snobbish lounge on the way to a hockey game? Or a slick spot for a girls' night out?

All of the above, it seems. Here you get \$16 ball-park franks alongside an \$80 glass of wine (yes, you read that right; see Star wine critic Gord Stimmell's comments below). You also get game watchers cheering at the bar, The Black Keys playing overhead and swish cocktails by New York mixologist Fred Dexheimers.

e11even is Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment's first foray into non-sports dining.

The owners of Toronto's professional hockey, basketball and soccer teams stepped outside the arena with the November opening of e11even, named for the number of points on our maple leaf. (The trick spelling is hard to Google.)

The restaurant tries to be all things to all people, never a good thing. Well, almost all people. Those targeted — condo dwellers, [Hotel Le Germain](#) guests, power lunchers, ACC seat holders, dating couples and rowdy gals — don't include culinary thrill seekers, says corporate executive chef Robert Bartley.

"You're not going to e11even to learn something new. You're going there to feed the craving for recognizable foods. Nothing too out there," Bartley says. (He oversees e11even's site executive chef, David Isen.)

The result is something like a high-end Kelsey's, with disappointing food. Only a few desserts, the house-smoked salmon (\$16) and a meaty bacon appetizer (\$9) that recalls maple-glazed ham are successful.

First impressions, though, are favourable. The hostesses are gracious, the curved booths attractive and the open kitchen's tilted overhead mirrors lets us watch the action as on

television. There are cool gadgets like the iPad wine list and the Toto bidet seats in the women's washrooms.

Then the food comes, and the spell is broken.

It starts with the erroneously named Parker House rolls — really, brioche — and goes on to cover a crab cake (\$19) of extreme fishiness, a bland \$19 meatball made of grainy Kobe beef and a dialed-down caesar salad (\$13).

And that's just the appetizers. There's a shameful lobster cobb salad (\$34), dry roast chicken (\$24) and prime rib (\$29) that, while tender, is cold.

I'm still scratching my head over the \$16 hot dog, a foot-long frank from Baldwin St. Kosher. A similar dog sells for half the price at ACC concession stands. Same toasted and buttered ACE Bakery bun, too. The tah-dah! presentation at e11even — modern china, artful squirts of mustard and ketchup, pickle tray — hardly adds value, while the generic devilled eggs and gloppy savoy cabbage slaw put this dish in the red.

For a restaurant that screams up and down it is not a steakhouse, there's a lot of old-school red meat at e11even.

Or maybe it's just old-tasting meat. Certainly the long aging process (25 days wet aging, 21 to 23 days dry) for the Canadian Prime rib-eyes (\$49 for 14 ounces) and USDA Prime strip loins (\$55 for 12 ounces) approaches what the British would call "high." The meat is safe and just the way Bartley says customers want it.

Each bite hits the back of the throat like a hoof to the uvula. The texture, though, is grainy.

Save for the sauces (wicked horseradish, weak béarnaise) and complimentary roasted heads of garlic, steaks come without side dishes. That means paying extra for gritty creamed corn (\$8), dry stuffing (\$8), decent mash (\$8) and an unstinting truffled mac and cheese (\$10) in a cast-iron Staub casserole.

At each of two visits, no less than six people wait on us, from the cocktail waitress to the busboy. And that doesn't include the managers circulating the room.

Sometimes the service is well-informed and engaging. Sometimes, it's like *Fawlty Towers*, as when the busboy sweeps crumbs into our lap. Not once do our entrées arrive together.

You can't fault e11even on portion sizes. Witness the humongous desserts (\$10), more bitter brownie, bland cheesecake and tangy pineapple-carrot cake than anyone could ever want.

At least pastry chef Wally Aruda's key lime pie is as fine as it is generous, the silky curd almost buried under a mountain of barely sweetened whipped cream.

But the best dish at e11even is the plate of warm chocolate-chip cookies, made from Bartley's mother's recipe and served with a frothy glass of 2 per cent milk.

That's more my kind of drink than the \$1,800 shot of Remy Martin Louis XIII Black Pearl cognac on the dessert menu. (Cue coffee sputter.)

The server tells the story of two high-rollers who ordered the cognac.

"They tried it, then poured it into Diet Coke," she says.

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