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e11even Toronto: get ready for an amazing meal...

recommended by Nikki Bayley



It's fun having your pre-conceptions completely turned on their head.

Take e11even, for instance. On first glance, it looks like a sports bar. In common with most Toronto bars and restaurants, the lighting is low and the vibe is cosy not dressy. Over the bar are flat screen TVs playing the latest match. 'Fancy burgers', I thought to myself as I was led to the back section. 'Maybe gooped-up cocktails too.'

I could not have been more wrong.

I settled into my dark booth at the back, with a view over the open kitchen with a huge mirror overhead. Clearly the chefs are proud of what they do and want you to see it too. At my first bite, I found out why. A 'Parker Roll' arrived instead of a bread basket. This is a positive cake of a bread, spangled with salt, eggy, moist, soft and exactly the kind of thing that you scarf down and ruin your appetite with. Already this was better than many meals I'd had in swankier joints... what next? I tried the house special of double-cut bacon, slow-marinated in white wine and served with a maple sherry reduction. The bacon was crisp at the edges with a dense meaty, salty flavour. I got a hit of jammy sweetness balanced perfectly with the bite of the acidic sherry vinegar.

Crab cakes arrived, spicy and packed with chunks of tender flesh, not shredded as is usual. They tasted reassuringly expensive and deliciously smooth. I could see now why there were so many couples here. This wasn't about watching the game at the front of the restaurant, it was all about the cosy booths and date food at the back.

A hot-smoked salmon next and it may sound like an odd thing to say, but it tasted very precisely of the sea, rather than the smoke and was wonderful because of that. The flesh was soft and almost raw in the centre - sashimi for beginners, perhaps? I'd left my wine choice to the sommelier, Jennifer (how many sports bars have those?) who, it turns out is the only female wine master sommelier in the whole country. She gave me an iPad to look over, which listed all the wines, cocktails and spirits along with detailed tasting notes. This was a very cute touch, and so I know that my Reising Dolomite from Ontario's Cave Spring was meant to be 'peachy and zesty' and happily, it was.

I tried a wittily de-constructed Linguine Carbonara (a chance to get at some more of that amazing double-cut bacon) which arrived in a creamy, garlic-y sauce, complete with a fried egg on top. Perfect. I'd recommend the knife and fork baby back ribs too, which I wrote were 'almost worth working yourself into a crisis for, just so you can comfort yourself with these after'. Bold flavours are at work here, a sharp tang of vinegar, a slick of sticky sweetness, the pork just tumbled apart with the perfect foil of candied peanuts to crunch scattered on top.

I knew I shouldn't have attacked that Parker Roll, I couldn't face desert, no, not even milk and cookies, made with the executive chef's grandma's famous recipe. Next time.

Service was absolutely superb here too, David, my waiter was working the section and doing a dazzling job. Just before I left, a table of four insisted on shaking hands with him and there was nothing but cheery smiles to be seen, none of that tense, where's-my-food atmosphere you find so often.

I thought I'd be eating a thoroughly forgettable meal, instead I got home style classics, cooked by experts and served by angels. Totally recommended.

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Cost 3 course a la carte: £25 - £35 per person