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Hotel dining, boutique-style

By Laura Bianchi
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Upscale restaurants in boutique hotels are gaining ground in Chicago, notably Ajasteak in the Dana and Affinia's C-House, both of which opened to enthusiastic reviews last year. I checked out two recent entries with utterly opposite personalities.

Pelago

*201 E. Delaware Place
(312) 280-0700*

Michelle Obama, I imagine, would love Pelago. It's chic, intimate and chef-driven, calling to mind two of her other faves, Sepia in the West Loop and Spiaggia on the Mag Mile.

Owners Mauro Mafri, a Michelin star holder for his former New York venture, Lo Scalco, and his architect wife, Kimberly Anguil Mafri, created the concept and designed the bi-level space in the Gold Coast's Raffaello Hotel.

White, faux-leather chairs, porcelain chandeliers and aqua damask banquettes mix traditional with modern, much like the menu.

Pelago (PEL-ah-go) means "open sea" in Italian, and the restaurant's seafood-based, seasonal selections are limited but creative and presented with style. Even breads, pastas and ice creams are made on-site.

A two-course lunch is \$22, three-course \$28, but expect fine-dining extras, like a breaded mozzarella-anchovy amuse bouche, imaginatively served on carrot puree.

Avocado cream deftly pulls together shrimp salad with bitter greens and cherry tomatoes misted with chive vinaigrette.

Pastas show promise. Ricotta and Swiss chard ravioli in sage sauce drew raves for flavor, but the edges were too chewy.

Sautéed striped bass with tomatoes will be a sellout, light and refreshing in white wine sauce. Breaded monkfish was firm and crisp but uninspired, despite the tomato salad.

Entrees came with mashed potatoes, broccoli rabe and roasted tomato wedge.

Desserts sparkle. Complimentary one-bite morsels pose prettily in a miniature cake server; among them is a strawberry tart. Need more? Add the sugar cookie cylinder stuffed with banana-mascarpone sabayon and topped with blueberry sorbet.

The chef's attentiveness to patrons compensated for a server who wasn't yet familiar with the menu.

Elate

111 W. Huron St.

(312) 202-9900

Where Pelago is soft and feminine, Elate is ruggedly handsome, like a fellow in a suit with stubble on his face. The warm, industrial space in the Hotel Felix, with 70 seats, is a good look for business. But recipes still need to be tweaked.

The menu is seasonal, contemporary American and short, with organic ingredients and interesting fillips like parsley aioli and red onion marmalade on a turkey sandwich (\$12).

Charring is great for steak, not so much for a romaine salad that fell short of its \$9 promise. Just the outer leaves are blackened; the rest is merely romaine hearts artfully tied in a bundle, with tomatoes, creamy garlic and parmesan dressing and two rather dry, cheese-topped crostini.

Herb-grilled flatbread (\$11) needs revamping, too; the roasted beets, fennel and ricotta salata lack a unifying vinaigrette.

Entrees were more successful. Smoked tomato compote rocks a robust skirt steak sandwich (\$13) topped with gooey mozzarella. Fries are included, but ours were overcooked; we preferred a side of celery root and apple slaw (\$5).

Quiche (\$12) is worth the 15-minute wait. Flaky puff pastry is topped with buttery egg filling and roasted, seasoned vegetables. Melon salad and a too-salty herb mix round out the plate.

Pot au crème (\$6) almost gets it right with creamy chocolate custard and crushed Butterfingers. But the flurry of salt on the whipped cream was just wrong.

Service was friendly and accommodating.

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