

At Long Last, Louisville Has its Empire

by Rob Peaslee

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Bottom line: Great food finds a home on Main Street.

Settled into the space occupied for so long by its predecessor Pasquini's, Empire is an eclectic and elegant reimagining of a space that has screamed "potential." Gone is the shabby familiarity that was the pizzeria's true hallmark and in its place is a groovy bistro accented with soft lighting, a comfortable lounge, and excellent food and drink.

We took our seats toward the end of a busy Saturday night, occupying one of the many bankhead tables that stretch down the north wall of the storefront space.

Above us, a series of well-placed mirrors reflected the urban black and brown wall tones, come-hither booths for two, and kitschy decorations. The simple placesetting of linen roll-ups, water glasses and bread plates suggested the brand of hip-casual fine dining to which the Empire aspires. The menu backs this up.

Sectioned into such categories as "snacks," "plates" and "suppers," the docket at Empire allows diners to order either individually, as a pair or as a group. Most of the snacks are affordable, such as the Charred Cherry Tomato Crostini (\$4) or the Small Fry of Sweet Potato, Onion, Calamari and Lemon Aioli (\$7), each of which we sampled along with a side of Sautéed Escarole with Fried Chick Peas (\$5). Each component of this first course medley was effective in its way. The Crostini offered the pleasant tactile contrast of the soft, fleshy tomatoes and the crispy bread, but in the end was a trifle one-dimensional in flavor—an herb note would have been welcome.

The Small Fry, which featured each of its titular ingredients, battered and fried, atop a small dollop of the aioli, could have used more of the latter but overall was a satisfying finger food. The Escarole, finally, was a big hit: bold flavor complemented by the odd but strangely addictive mouthfeel of deep-fried chickpeas.

Entrées (in Empire parlance, "plates" or "suppers") range from \$7-\$19, with a handful of specials available for up to \$25. Every plate we saw pass by was presented with panache, and ours were no exception. We tried the Pumpkin Risotto (\$13), which was supplemented by roasted mushrooms and Mascarpone cheese, as well as the awkwardly named "Tenderest Short Ribs of Beef" (\$17). The Risotto was a pleasing belly-filler with ample amounts of both mushroom and mascarpone. The Rib, meanwhile, was a delight, swathed in a rich port wine reduction and served atop creamy horseradish potato gratin. Alongside our server Nicole's superb wine recommendation, a spicy Zinfandel from Chessman in Paso Robles, California, the Rib was a toe curler.

The Zin was so good, in fact, that we couldn't resist sharing a second glass alongside the Nemesis Flourless Chocolate Cake (\$7), a tasty, if conventional, example of the genre served over a too subtle hazelnut cream.



Photo by Ray Rushing



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Taken together, the food and ambience of The Empire are good enough to give them the title of Louisville's principle culinary location. A certain sense of humor and hyperbole gives the menu a snarky tone that may be a bit too pronounced.

It may seem that I've offered a little more criticism than usual for a four-star restaurant, but it's in good nature. Empire's menu and attitude set the expectations high in the sky, and it comes exceptionally close to this bar, even as it negotiates its identity as a meeting point between neighborhood and destination restaurant.