



The new restaurant, Zengo, in Penn Quarter mixes Latin and Asian flavors, such as this crispy whole striped bass with Guajillo hot and sour sauce.



Chris Maddaloni/Roll Call

Flavors Tango at Zengo

Celeb Chef's Fusion
Best in Small Plates

By **Amanda McClements**

ROLL CALL CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Sipping a refreshing cucumber mojito in the sleek dining room of the new Zengo, my mind wandered into a daydream. I imagined living in a city where national celebrity chefs are clamoring for pieces of real estate to bring their brand of cooking to the savvy dining public. Sure, I could move to Las Vegas, but what if that city was Washington, D.C.?

"Yeah right," you might scoff, but maybe it's not such a stretch. Long ago considered a culinary wasteland of meat-and-potato clubhouses, the District seems poised to attract enterprising chefs who look to the nation's capital and see a dining audience hungry for more choices.

That was the case for Zengo chef and owner Richard Sandoval, who already owns six other restaurants in Las Vegas, San Francisco, New York and Denver. After visiting D.C. and seeing how difficult it was to get into the hottest restaurants, Sandoval figured his Latin-Asian fusion restaurant would find a receptive audience here.

He appears to have been right. Since its mid-October opening in the Penn Quarter neighborhood, the well-dressed masses have been crowding Zengo's lounge each night to sip those daydream-inducing cucumber mojitos and raspberry caipirinhas, while a long communal table upstairs, conveniently situated in front of the second bar, has also become a hot hangout. It's clear that Zengo's bartenders, who are helpful and fast, were well trained.

Thanks to D.C.'s star design team of

Zengo's Big Tastes Come in Small Sizes

DINING REVIEW, from page 33

low Penn Quarter lookers Zaytinya and Zola), the tastefully subdued restaurant is a sexy backdrop for a meal or cocktails, awash in earthy tones of orange and terra cotta. The street level is home to a long bar and lounge seating, and a massive flight of industrial stone-colored stairs opens up into the spacious dining room, where curved booths line one wall and soft lighting casts a warm glow.

MORE DINING REVIEW

Following the tapas restaurant formula, Zengo's menu offers numerous small plates reflecting the Latin and Asian fusion theme, including sushi rolls, dim sum, ceviche and antojitos (Mexican small plates). To start, your server will most likely try to sell you on a bowl of edamame, served either traditionally salted or "XO style," in a spicy sauce with salty Serrano ham. Go for the latter, especially if you don't mind a little heat.

Perusing a menu with so many options, I'd rarely pay attention to something as common as salad, but the tuna tataki salad had my dining companion swearing to return. Nicely seared rare tuna sat atop greens so fresh and crisp it made me wonder how so many restaurants manage to screw up something as simple as a salad. Toasted pumpkin seeds, crunchy sprouts and a tangy vinaigrette joined the tuna in creating a memorable dish.

The three ceviche choices are another good way to try Zengo's seafood offerings. The lively Bangkok ceviche brings together mahi mahi and green papaya bathed in a tart lime

Lamb chops at Zengo get the Latin-Asian treatment with hoisin-adobe sauce.

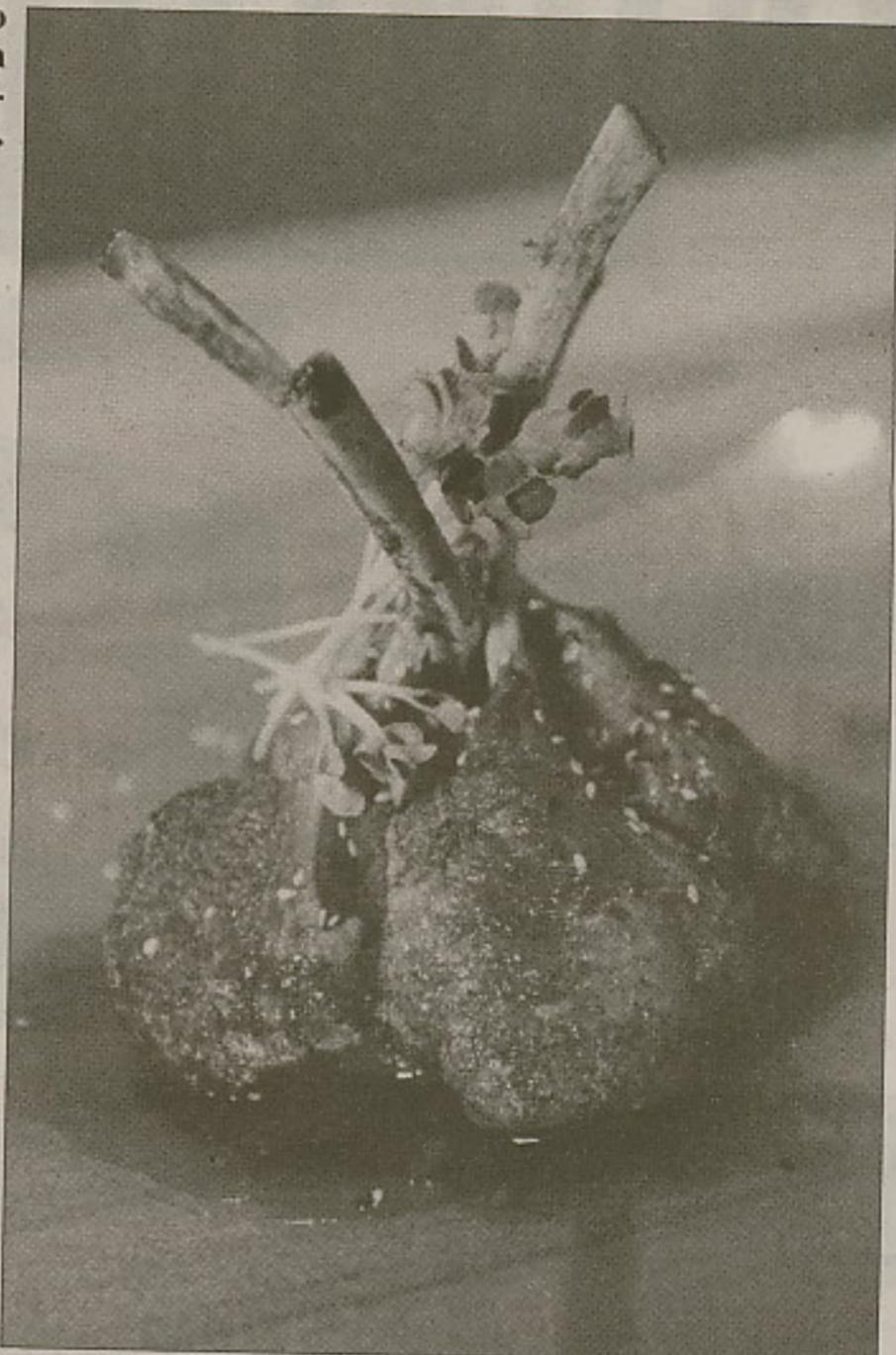
and coconut marinade. And then there are tiraditos, a Latin take on sashimi. We opted for the yellowfin tuna, which arrived thinly sliced and lined up on a plate with a chive ponzu sauce.

If you prefer your seafood cooked, three of Zengo's four sushi rolls offer cooked components. The volcano roll, for example, combines crab meat on the inside with cooked salmon rolled around the outside. Raw salmon would've tasted better, but I guess the point is to offer an alternative to all the uncooked options.

Although many of the dishes fuse traditional ingredients from both Latin and Asian cooking, most come across as decidedly one or the other. Stand-outs from the Latin pedigree include bite-size arepas, or corn cakes, topped with tender chopped pork, a dollop of avocado and crema fresca, and fluffy empanadas stuffed with creamy cheese and chicken (listed as Thai chicken on the menu, but there was no apparent flavor indicating that) and jazzed up by a bright and flavorful mango curry sauce.

Heading back to Asia, you'll find potstickers and spring rolls, but I couldn't resist the gyoza dumplings, stuffed with a decadent blend of foie gras, shrimp and pork and backed up by passion fruit mustard.

With so many choices to keep you busy sharing with the table, the 10 or so entrées almost seem like a distraction. The adobo grilled mahi mahi was overwhelmed by the sauce smothering it and the creamy sauce garnishing the plate. And the Kobe beef entrée, which you cook yourself on a sterno-heated stone, is a good way to blow your budget for minimal return. At \$10 an ounce with a three-ounce minimum, the beef alone, accompanied by a



Chris Maddaloni/Roll Call

wasabi dipping sauce, wasn't worth the price tag. The meat is tender and high quality, but the thinly sliced rounds tend to fall apart on the stone, causing some amusing grease flare-ups and concerned expressions from nearby tables.

Instead, stick with the theme and the smaller plates. That might leave you with more room for the light-as-a-feather churros, dusted with sugar and joined on the plate by a sinfully rich chocolate shooter topped with a pop of meringue that tasted like marshmallow.

Though the restaurant seems to be running smoothly for being less than a month old, Zengo's kitchen took a hit when chef de cuisine Alan Yu announced he was taking a leave of absence for personal reasons. Sandoval said he and a chef from the Denver Zengo will oversee the kitchen in the meantime.

Perhaps other nationally known chefs will follow in Sandoval's footsteps and see D.C. as the hot restaurant town it has become. We may be a long way from Vegas, baby, but give it a few years and who knows? We're waiting for you, Emeril.

Zengo

Address: 781 Seventh St. NW

Phone: (202) 393-2929

Hours: Sunday through Thursday 5-10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday 5-11:30 p.m., bar stays open later. Lunch service starts Nov. 7.

Reservations: Recommended

Prices: Small plates \$8-\$13, entrées \$18-\$30

Of note: Zengo plans to eventually unveil a take-out window that will offer select items from the menu during lunch and dinner, and maybe even breakfast items such as Vietnamese coffee, Sandoval said.

Bottom line: It's Latin, it's Asian, it's lively and it's good looking. Check out Zengo for its spirited cocktails and small plates.

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