

Lucier: Swank Sophistication

New Portland restaurant delivers luxury on a plate

REVIEW BY KATE ASTLE

I LOVE PORTLAND. There's new promise every day on the dynamic food scene here, and Lucier is no exception. So dust off those Italian shoes, slip into something pretty and step out for the evening.

Lucier (pronounced loo-see-AY) opened on May 26 in a prime piece of real estate on Portland's South Waterfront.

It's not just another table. Consider it a combination of proven talent producing flawless French-influenced continental cuisine, an extraordinary wine cellar and creative front-of-the-house brigade service. The restaurant offers Pacific Northwest accessibility imbued

with refined elegance and eclectic decor. It demands of the patron an appreciation for subtlety, a delicacy of palate, receptivity to surprise—and it rewards decidedly.

This newest element of Portlander Chris Dussin's group, Lucier's co-proprietor and executive chef is Pascal Chureau of Fenouil. The pedigreed Chureau rocks Fenouil's kitchen, and does the same here. Chureau refers to Lucier's cuisine as "Modern European." I refer to it as an exuberant marriage of classic and contemporary, with creativity enough to whet many appetites. This is sensuous food, beautiful food, close-your-eyes delicious food.

The gorgeous offerings are aided and abetted by a stellar and carefully chosen cellar: Lucier showcases 1,800 selections from an 18,000-bottle inventory with an excellent selection of vintage Champagnes (they must have seen me coming). More astounding yet is a willingness to serve about 50 wines by the glass, with a focus on Champagne and Oregon wines. This abundant representation of our state superstars is such that you vintners out there owe the place a visit. You'll thank me later.

I asked Dussin if he was shooting for a kind of destination spot, a Northwest version of, say, French Laundry. He's a man who understands his market. Carefully, diplomatically, he explained his concept:

to provide food of like caliber with zero pretension. His passion for the menu and his excitement about the partnership with Chureau were palpable, and he's cultivated the best of the best. Housed in a stunning property, Lucier defines juxtaposition: serious and playful, elegant and accessible, gracious and exacting. Chureau's team of chefs, hand-selected from highly regarded kitchens all over the U.S., do not disappoint. This winning, appealing combination, opening in the early days of summer, windowed onto the Willamette River, promises success.

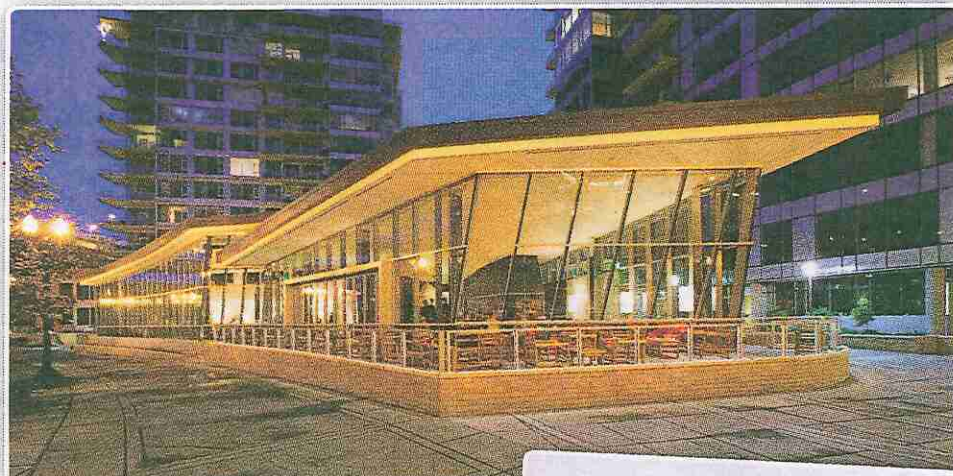
So, of course, I couldn't write a review and sound like a PR firm. I had to go eat. I wanted to go eat. I gave Lucier but a scant two

weeks to work out the customary opening kinks, recruited a friend, and dined.

Complimentary valet service, literally at the door, provided welcome and communicated our arrival to the front of the house. We walked in to a coterie of goodwill, comprised of the maitre'd and four stunning hostesses (think smoldering beauty, a cross between a younger version of the Bond girl and the classicism of Princess Grace). One took my coat, another showed us to our table. The kindly and knowledgeable sommelier presented the wine list a well-orchestrated instant later, and quietly delivered perfectly chilled Krug within minutes.

The challenge of the brigade paradigm—a service model I have long preferred—is to walk the fine line between attentive and overbearing. Lucier's staff made the cut. Our glasses were never empty, I never stared at a concluded plate or had to ask for a piece of cutlery, and did not, thankfully, ever feel rushed, though we occupied our table for twice the customary time.

The kitchen tour merits an exemplary report: It's sleek and clean, nuanced by the hushed, well-orchestrated hum of professionals. In conversation, a chef acquaintance eloquently said to me, "...one of my favorite things about working in high-end kitchens is you really do this 'impossible'



thing every night. Even if we do a low number, say a hundred, each person on average getting four courses, plus amuse-bouche, intermezzo and dessert—that's 700 plates, all done cleanly, quietly and perfectly. To me, even after many such nights, it's absolutely amazing."

It was indeed absolutely amazing. I had five courses, starting with a dish from the Chef's Tasting Menu. I'm not permitted enough words to describe each plate; besides, I need to leave you a few surprises. The seared yellowfin tuna (with kumquat butter, olive tuile, mâche and pomegranate syrup) was flawless. Yellowfin is found everywhere, but this was singularly exceptional. The roast duck (with juniper ice cream, almond cake, carrot battonnets and licorice) was cooked to perfection and paired, thanks to the sommelier, with a lovely Meritage. The lemon soufflé was delicacy and balance unprecedented.

William Cory, the charmer of the evening, presented the cheese cart service and, with careful attention, provided an array of artisan offerings with creative accompaniments (think candied kumquats with brie).

My companion's highlights? The lamb (with fava beans, heirloom tomatoes au

TOP: The 7,600-square-foot glass and steel structure houses a sleek, serene interior with a unique water feature, dramatic ceiling treatment and other distinctive elements. **ABOVE:** Lucier offers inventive, contemporary cuisine while honoring the past. **ABOVE LEFT:** Lucier owners Tyanne and Chris Dussin celebrate the opening of the restaurant with chef Pascal Chureau. Photos courtesy of Lucier.

sel and sweet potato gnocchi) and the carpaccio of scallops (with foie gras au sel shavings, micro celery, yuzu lemon and picholine olives).

One final note: The kitchen successfully reinvented the lowly crouton, elevating it from something a lady can't eat properly and most push to the side of the plate. This little bite of bread was tenderly crisp, a soft pillow at the center. The care taken with that crouton attests to a love of food. And a love of food is paramount to the character of a restaurant. ☺

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