



Winter Warmers

A MEXICAN RESTAURANT THAT'S A FEAST FOR THE EYES AND A COZY BISTRO NEAR GEORGETOWN ARE WARDING OFF THE CHILL IN D.C. THIS SEASON

Stephen Starr may be best known as the Philadelphia restaurateur behind such beloved establishments as Parc and Buddakan, but he has long had a presence in the District with spots like Le Diplomate and St. Anselm; his latest project, El Presidente, is billed as a “neo-retro” Mexican eatery. Named for the city’s most famous resident, the concept is located in the new Signal House office building near Union Market. The interior of the 6,000-square-foot space, designed by AvroKO, is nothing if not theatrical: The blue oval bar with red stools is topped with dioramas of animals and sea creatures, and the main dining room is a study in crimson, from the velvet curtains, plush chairs, and chandeliers to the floor tiles; a mural of a rocky red desert serves as the backdrop, and the overall effect is wildly surreal.

The drink list leans heavily on agave spirits, with a smattering of tropical rum sippers. For \$28, the Big AF Margarita doesn’t seem to be particularly oversized,

but I appreciated The Elephant in the Room—a fun, balanced mix of blanco tequila, gin, Campari, bitter guava, and grapefruit—while the spa-like Tranquilo Papi with blanco tequila, aloe liqueur, cucumber juice, and lemon put out the fire of the hottest dishes on the table. Those included the spicy guacamole with charred habanero, mint, basil, and a garnish of crunchy cubes of jicama to temper the chiles. Unfortunately, thin slices of ahi tuna set atop a crispy tostada didn’t fare as well, as a heavy-handed slathering of chipotle aioli overwhelmed them.

Most tacos come in pairs, perfect for mixing and matching with a companion. Cubes of skirt steak were tucked into homemade tortillas along with avocado, chimichurri, and pico de gallo; silky black cod al pastor picked up sweetness from grilled pineapple chunks, though it was begging for more seasoning than the morita aioli. In short, the meal was a mixed



Roasted cauliflower with dates, mint, pistachios, and Calabrian chili at Ellington Park Bistro.



PHOTOS: KELLY MAGVARICS

The Elephant in the Room cocktail at El Presidente.

bag—but as we dipped our piping-hot churros into creamy milk chocolate and tart raspberry sauce and looked at the crowded dining room on a Friday night, we knew El Presidente would become a *starr* of the neighborhood.

A few miles away in Dupont Circle, the Parisian-inspired Ellington Park Bistro inside the St. Gregory Hotel is named for Duke Ellington Park just across the street. Cozy and convivial, it was a great spot to catch up with a writer friend whom I hadn’t seen in ages. We started dishing over a round of drinks. Prelude to a Kiss was a heady yet delicate sip with gin, crème de violette, lavender, lemon, and egg white; The Feeling of Jazz was a complex concoction that combined Cognac with Bonal, Amontillado Sherry, truffle honey, and lavender bitters.

As Ellington Park’s top toque, Frank Morales, left a few months ago to get married and move to California, Jennifer Ortega now oversees the kitchen. Her roasted cauliflower was a fragrant and flavorful starter, studded with dates, mint, pistachios, and Calabrian chili, but PEI mussels were a tad mushy from too long a soak in their herby wine broth. Filet mignon au poivre was a solid choice, served alongside massive, crispy onion rings; the whole branzino was perfectly cooked; and sweet onion puree was a fun swap for mashed potatoes. Between the comfort food and the elegant cocktails, Ellington Park Bistro is definitely a place to hole up until spring. **LD**