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BY MICHAEL A. GARDINER

THE WORLD FARE

Character and perfection

Increasingly, it seems, top restaurants in Los Angeles and London, New York and New Dehli, San Sebastian and São Paulo look the same, feel the same and have even begun to taste the same. The internet brought ease of access to information and images but also a convergence among previously disparate parts of the culinary scene.

It is refreshing, then, to see a chef's individuality and heritage on a plate. So it is with Chef Jason Knibb at **Nine-Ten Restaurant and Bar** (910 Prospect St.) inside the Grande Colonial Hotel in La Jolla.

MICHAEL GARDINER



ROASTED COLORADO LAMB LOIN

Take, for example, Nine-Ten's Jamaican jerk pork belly appetizer. Yes, the presentation is modern—featuring a beautiful block of braised pork belly with black-eyed peas seemingly spilling out of it and framed by swooshes of sauce and sweet potato purée, toothsome carrots and a chard garnish. But the signature flavor of Knibb's Jamaican homeland—jerk—owns the dish. That it does so while maintaining balance with the other elements is what makes Knibb the caliber of chef he is and Nine-Ten the restaurant it is.

At lunch, the domain of Sous Chef Rocio Siso-Gurriaran, a highlight is the grilled octopus she serves with a caramelized golden raisin purée, chorizo and pistachios over a shaved fennel salad with feta vinaigrette. As the jerked pork belly is to Knibb so is the grilled octopus to Siso-Gurriaran. Pulpo a la Gallega is virtually the national dish of her homeland, Galicia.

Not everything at Nine-Ten works so well or has such a sense of grounding. The Maine lobster salad has "local citrus segments," a citrus aioli, basil, sorrel, frisée lettuce and Hawaiian hearts of palm. It's pretty much a trip all over the Western Hemisphere. If there was massive payoff on the palate it might be worthwhile. There isn't. It's ingredients in search of an idea.

Nine-Ten's wild striped bass entrée is a different story. The fish is the star but it is the combination of English peas (both in pea and tendril form) with morel mushrooms that is the key. A brown butter potato purée underlines the earthiness of the morels. But it is the third appearance of peas on the plate—a pea and herb emulsion—that puts the dish over the top.

If Nine-Ten has a signature protein it's lamb. Knibb roasts lamb loin leaving it lusciously pink in the middle and pairing it with spice roasted carrots, escarole, black garlic and onion marmalade as well as a sunchoke (aka Jerusalem artichoke) and sunflower seed purée. Or try the lamb tartare: hand chopped lamb tossed with orange chili oil and pickled onion—sprinkled with cured egg yolk—featuring the warmth of black garlic and served alongside a masa cracker. It's never a mistake

to order lamb at Nine-Ten.

The atmosphere of the restaurant may not be the most exquisite, suffering from slightly cramped quarters and a dated sense of luxury that says old-style La Jolla. But what goes on the plate is world-class perfection that clearly reflects the character and personalities of the chefs who brought it into being. **CB**

*The World Fare appears weekly.
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