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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

It's OK, play hooky

Michael Cimarusti's new lunch menu is a great midday indulgence.

By S. Irene Virbila
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When most of us think about going out to a great restaurant for a meal, we're usually thinking dinner, not lunch. I would, however, like to tout the pleasures of a leisurely lunch at Providence.

For most of us, spending a couple of hours over lunch can be only a very occasional indulgence. It feels like playing hooky — and it is, in a way. It's time spent outside the pressures of the everyday. You're more alert and relaxed than at dinner. Taking the time to have lunch with someone close — be it friend or lover or spouse — feels extraordinarily luxurious.

At Providence, which now serves lunch Wednesdays through Fridays, chef Michael Cimarusti delivers with a terrific a la carte menu.

On a Friday, the room, which looks subtly different in the daylight, is filled with diners sipping wine, tucking into Cimarusti's sensual seafood dishes. It's somehow absurdly festive.

For starters, there's a blue fin tuna tartare of exquisite quality, hand-chopped and garnished with a little avocado, radish and a sharp green peppercorn dressing; it's even better than the version Cimarusti used to make at Water Grill when he was chef there. You might find *kanpachi* sashimi with pickled white elf mushrooms or his irresistible quahog fritters with yuzu mayonnaise. At a recent lunch, my friend Roberta and I couldn't stop eating these delectable clam fritters.

Though most everything on the menu is seafood, there is a sautéed foie gras appetizer, right now with quince, and a petite rib steak. But frankly, you can eat steak anywhere, while Providence is, hands down, the best seafood restaurant in Los Angeles and one of the best in the country.

Main courses recently included a pristine skate wing with apple-wood-smoked bacon and a wispy frisée salad; sumptuous barbecued eel served over a risotto dotted with *shimeji* mushrooms; and meaty monkfish served with clams, squid and cranberry beans.

Maine lobster salad with citrus and asparagus was overwhelmed, though, by a vanilla and *rooibos* tea vinaigrette so potent it's almost a perfume. (*Rooibos* is an herbal tea from South Africa, also known as red bush tea.)

Soon you're going to have to choose: cheese or dessert. And it's a hard decision. You probably can't do both. The cheese cart rolls by covered with handsome examples in every genre, with a cheese sommelier to explain them.

Before pastry chef Adrian Vasquez came on board, I would have gone with the cheese. But his desserts are so compelling, I've switched allegiance. How can you not, when he comes up with things like a pineapple "torchon" that mimics the cylindrical shape of foie gras *au torchon* presented with *pain perdu* (French toast) and a subtle fennel ice cream? Or a dreamy milk chocolate panna cotta with marshmallows and a Kahlúa reduction? Nothing is too sweet, the flavors held in graceful balance.

The good news is you can still do lunch in this town, and very swell it is.

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Providence

Where: 5955 Melrose Ave., L.A.

When: Lunch, noon to 2:30 p.m. Wednesdays through Fridays. Full bar. Valet parking.

Price: Appetizers, \$11 to \$24; main courses, \$19 to \$45 (for black truffle risotto or *tagliolini*); desserts, \$9 to \$12

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