Happy Surprises

Nuanced delights from the kitchen at Salts

Success is making a bit of trouble for Gabriel Bremer and Analia Verolo. Two years ago they bought Salts, a popular bistro near Central Square, and changed everything but the name and its dimensions. Bremer, 27, is the chef. Verolo, a Uruguayan, who runs the front of the house, met him when they apprenticed at Fore Street, a restaurant in Portland, Maine. Early, uniformly rave reviewers of Salts under their management noted parenthetically that the couple were engaged but hadn’t found time to get married.

On a recent Tuesday evening, little Salts was packed to capacity: 42 diners. Forty-two is four or eight too many (economics be dammed). You can’t go to the bathroom without asking people to get up and move their chairs. Forty-two people make too much noise in narrow confines, especially when competing with five merry guys eating at the back of the room who may have been celebrating the discovery of the century at MIT that afternoon. Forty-two mouths to feed strain one chef and three helpers in the kitchen. One waits too long for one’s food, no matter how charming a hostess Verolo is. Although the lemon soufflé tart ($10) for dessert is said to be a little marvel, when the time came to consider it, we had been two hours and 20 minutes at table and were ready to be somewhere else.

These troubles arise because the food is exceedingly good—and surprising. Tasting the theses and thats on one’s plate is like opening a series of unanticipated and delightful birthday presents. Anyone serious about cooking or eating should experience Bremer’s fare.

It’s French with an American accent. Appetizers we sampled included veal sweatbreads in a robust molasses butter, with radishes and micro sorrel ($14); agnolotti pasta stuffed with Robiola Due Latte cheese, with braised rabbit, white truffle, lovage (celery on steroids), and peas ($15); and a salad with (the mildest of greens) mache, chèvre, and toasted hazelnut vinaigrette discreetly accompanying a juicy pear ($9). Among the entrees were an astonishingly tender ballotine of chicken (ballotine means “boned, stuffed, rolled, and tied in the shape of a bundle,” says the Epicurious dictionary), with “apricot white bean purée, sage leaf tempura, cocoa, and citrus brown butter” ($28). The roast wild salmon kept company in a tiny sea of smoky consommé with corn flan ($29). The beef tenderloin ($34) came with “red wine prune purée,” and it always should. Only the “free range organic lamb loin” ($36) disappointed slightly: flavorful, but it seemed to have gotten a mite chewy out there on the range.

The one staple on a frequently changing menu is a whole, roast, boneless duck carved tableside for two ($60), served this night with truffled peaches, braised leeks, and red wine “gastric.” All ducks were taken when we ordered. We were advised to order it in advance next time, because Bremer will not keep his duck overnight (it gets tough), and stocking the larder just right is a challenge. At our dejected looks, Verolo whisked to our table a gift—small bowls of squash soup.

Two years later, Bremer and Verolo are still engaged to be married. We aim to return for that duck.

—C.R.