A Warm Spot

Hearty American-French food fares well on a winter’s night.

It’s not immediately clear why Catalyst is so named. The word denotes a strong force effecting root-level, typically chemical, change. The Kendall Square restaurant, while very good, is not transforming the epicurean landscape of the neighborhood, itself an epicenter of global technology.

Chef/owner Bill Kovel, a New England native, serves solid, fresh American-French food. And the restaurant’s modern interior, dressed in all shades of soft browns and grays, has a lovely feel. Hand-blown, purplish glass-globed chandeliers offer flattering light, and wooden tables and floorboards (reclaimed from old barns) lend warmth—as does a two-way gas fireplace in the ultra-comfy lounge near the entrance.

The restaurant is very large, and the 30-foot, floor-to-ceiling windows that let in loads of natural light make it seem more so. Despite the airiness, we found the place cozy and relaxing. For quieter dining, avoid tables too close to the bar zone, a popular post-work and weekend hangout that easily hosts 40.

Catalyst serves brunch, lunch, and dinner. The menu often changes, but the food tends to run from rich to less so, with a mediating selection of salads and side greens.

To start, the bread comes with a nest of sweet butter, with olive oil in it. The corn agnolotti, a customer favorite, are soft envelops of creamed leeks in a saffron emulsion with bits (too few) of lobster ($12/$24, for half- or full-size portions). Juicy corn kernels and chopped chives on top added punch. A nice complement was the arugula and endive salad ($9) with Asian pear, blue cheese, and walnuts in a mustard vinaigrette. Nothing new, but fresh and sharp.

The salmon entrée ($27) featured a rectangular slab of fish covered with a green sauce that looked, we have to say, like algae. Under this were roasted cross-sections of fennel bulb that were a tad too raw. The green was pureéd spinach, we later learned, and the whole dish, with its slightly mossy flavor, did taste better than it looked. The tournedos of beef ($29) did not disappoint: well-seasoned meat (no need for a knife) with a side of creamed kale with bacon and a round of foie gras butter.

The excellent waitress knew her food and drinks—proffering a singular Scotch sour (made with egg whites) on the rocks—and never hovered. We didn’t, however, share her professed enjoyment of the butterscotch and passion-fruit pudding ($9). It was akin to a thick sugar soup. Moreover, the accompanying “pound cake croutons” were oily and bland.

Much better was the “chocolate decadence” cake ($9), with a creamy interior rare for flourless concoctions. On the side was a dollop of blackberry ice cream. We only wished to equalize the ratio of cake to ice cream: despite what Mae West may think, too much of a good thing, even chocolate, is not always “wonderful.”

We greatly enjoyed the atmosphere and most of the food. But, if Catalyst is striving to make any changes, it could perhaps diversify and tone down its lavish fare by better balancing flavors and ingredients.

~N.P.B.