

CRITIC'S RATING: 3 1/2 STARS

Kil@wat offers much more than proximity to theaters

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Jack Orton

While diners may just think of Kil@wat as a convenient place for dinner before a show, many of its appetizers, entrées and desserts are worthy of the spotlight in their own right. Citrus BBQ Glazed Salmon (\$20) pairs seared salmon with an updated version of German potato salad.

Dining Guide Map

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Deptolla's Star Ratings

**** **Extraordinary:** Consistently outstanding in all areas, including food, service, atmosphere and value. A first-class dining experience.

*** **Very good:** Most menu items are excellent, though a few might miss the mark. Service generally is very good. A memorable meal is guaranteed.

** **Good:** A worthy restaurant; food is generally appealing.

* **Fair:** A few entrées may be very good; most are average. Work is needed.

Carol Deptolla dines anonymously with food and drink paid for by the Journal Sentinel.

When you go to Kil@wat for dinner, especially on the weekend, you'll notice a great many diners rising and leaving about 7:15, or 7:45.

It's nearly showtime at theaters and auditoriums downtown.

But a good show is happening on the plates at Kil@wat, too.

Beautifully presented and well-flavored dishes were the norm from the kitchen headed by chef Robert Ash. With the closing of Coast restaurant at the lakefront Thursday to become a venue for private events, Kil@wat has surged ahead on my list of restaurants with great views. The second-story perch in the InterContinental Hotel looks out on a cityscape that includes the Marcus Center and skaters at Red Arrow Park.

Although my meals weren't without stumbles, those missteps were just blips in the overall experience.

Hearty dishes populate much of the winter menu, such as the osso buco (\$22), presented with two portions of Strauss lamb shanks instead of the traditional veal, topped with a bright, lemony gremolata and resting on nutty barley and root vegetables.

"Don't forget the marrow," the server said. "It's the best part."

A comforting dish called Grandma's Chicken (\$19) was tender and moist but for an edge of the breast that had dried out, the one spot the crisp skin didn't cover. Root vegetables flavored

with lemon and herb spaetzle - a touch too heavy - with a slight bite from black pepper made sturdy yet sprightly accompaniments.

From the composition side of the menu, Citrus BBQ Glazed Salmon (\$20), seared without and moist within, got its comfort component from a riff on German potato salad, with warm chunks of redskin potatoes coated in a light bacon-vinegar dressing.

One of the show-stoppers for me was the rosemary polenta cake (\$18). Its slightly crisp exterior gave way to a light, almost fluffy interior. A warm mushroom and fig salad was an earthy, delectable accompaniment. Arugula, a balsamic syrup and shaved Parmigiana-Reggiano cheese decorated the plate while adding flavorful notes. If only every restaurant gave its meatless entrées this much care.

The menu divides its entrées into compositions, such as the lamb osso buco, and classics, in which diners select an entrée - steak or seafood - and match it with a sauce and side.

I'd rather a chef do the choosing for me, but a 14-ounce New York strip steak (\$33) grilled with the bone in was a marvelous piece of meat, with a nice sear and done as ordered, medium rare. Creamy mashed potatoes (\$4) and a red wine sauce were ideal accompaniments.

Special appetizers

The highlight of the appetizers I sampled from the menu was the sea scallops (\$13) - two large, fresh mollusks, perfectly prepared, on a savory parsnip puree. Wild mushroom flatbread (\$9) ran a close second, with melted fontina cheese, arugula for a peppery note and aged sherry syrup for sweetness.

A nightly special appetizer really was special - perfectly al dente house-made cheese ravioli (\$13) with slices of a house-made pork and alligator sausage in a coarse tomato sauce. I like what this kitchen does when it ventures beyond the menu.

A citrus vinaigrette gave spark to a lovely composed salad of yellow and red roasted beet slices with goat cheese and frisee.

But the Wisconsin cheese fondue (\$8), without a heat source, formed an unappealing skin. The flavors of yellowtail sashimi ceviche (\$13), with celery, red onion, lemon grass and jalapeño, were lively, but the sashimi-style cut of the fish made the tuna seem limp; sturdy chunks just seem better suited to ceviche treatment.

Another misstep was an amuse-bouche of seafood in galantine-like form on a bed of spicy black beans. I hate to be an ingrate when presented with a gift, particularly the little one-bite wonders that fine restaurants offer their guests, but this one left me as cold as the spicy black beans were. It was no indication of how harmonious the rest of the meal would be.

But the desserts - the desserts, quite simply, rocked.

Strawberry shortcake (\$8) was re-imagined as a dome of strawberry chiboust, or cream, on a thin base of vanilla-bean cake. The garnishes only enhanced it - thin, sweet slices of strawberry; a rose-scented sauce; a small streak of powdered dried strawberry, like tangy Pixie Stix for adults.

Similarly, the 24K Peanut Butter Cup (\$8) placed a dome of peanut butter-chocolate cream on a moist chocolate cake base, covered in chocolate and illuminated with a tiny curl of gold leaf. Powdered peanut brittle garnished the plate.

A creamy individual cheesecake (\$8), wearing a square of pistachio brittle at a rakish angle, found a perfect match in a tangy, sweet and jammy blackberry-Merlot reduction.

Kil@wat recently introduced a new lineup of desserts by pastry chef Kurt Fogle, so expect to see others on your visit.

I was fond of brunch at Kil@wat, with entrées of hot-smoked salmon hash with poached eggs, dill hollandaise sauce and sourdough toast (\$11) and rich stuffed French toast (\$9) - a jumbo cinnamon roll split and filled with vanilla cream cheese, strewn with ripe banana slices and candied pecans and served with a graham cracker-crumb sauce.

Timing at lunch

Lunch hit the right notes, too: from the Tuscan Tuna Salad, with tender seared fish on arugula with olives, avocado and grilled ciabatta (\$13), to a fresh broiled whitefish BLT (\$10), to its revival of the Big Boy (\$10), the double-decker burger on a toasted bun with Thousand Island dressing.

It's an appropriate setting for a business lunch, but time was an issue on my visit. My dining companions and I couldn't escape in less than an hour, as we waited and waited for the check to arrive.

It was one of the few flaws in service I encountered at Kil@wat, which otherwise was well-paced, with a knowledgeable and friendly wait staff. Silverware was refreshed with each course, although replacements were forgotten once, and we sat with empty wine glasses briefly.

And if I'm going to list quibbles, I should mention the occasional heavily creased tablecloth. A minor point, sure, but it popped out in a what's-wrong-with-this-picture way, since everything else in the dining room was just so.

Servers at Kil@wat are aware that many of their guests dine with them before a show and considerately ask if they need to leave by a certain time.

Kil@wat, though, is a main event in its own right.

KIL@WAT

139 E. Kilbourn Ave., at N. Water St., on the InterContinental Hotel's second floor

(414) 291-4793

www.kilawatcuisine.com

*** 1/2 overall

(very good)

Food: *** 1/2

Service: ***

Ambience: *** 1/2

Fare: Contemporary American

Atmosphere: modern, with a dressy edge

Hours: breakfast, 6:30-10:30 a.m. Monday-Friday; brunch, 7 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday-Sunday; lunch, 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday-Friday; dinner, 5:30-10 p.m. Monday-Saturday

Prices: Entrées, \$18 to \$36

Payment: MasterCard, Visa, Discover, American Express

Wheelchair access: Yes

Parking: valet parking available, \$7

Smoking policy: non-smoking

Reservations: recommended

Noise level: quiet to chatty

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Original article located at: <http://www.jsonline.com/features/dining/36935894.html>