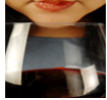


Eating Out: Chakra in Paramus

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RESTAURANT REVIEWER

Chakra is back.



KEVIN R. WEXLER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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Tuna tartar with coconut foam and tapioca at Chakra in Paramus.

When the spacious [Paramus](#) restaurant opened in 2004, it was as much about its cuisine as its Cambodian reliefs, cushy couch banquettes, lit waterfall and starry ceiling. But in recent years, it became the kind of place you went for the scene, the drinks, maybe even because it was on "Real Housewives of New Jersey," not so much for the food.

Today? The space is as dramatic as ever, but the real star is what's on your plate.

The difference: the summer takeover by one of the state's most highly regarded chefs. Thomas Ciszak is a German native who was a veteran of Tavern on the Green in Manhattan and The Manor in West Orange before taking the helm of Copeland at the Westin Governor Morris in Morristown, where he became known for elegant, innovative fare. His wife, Evelyn Ciszak, has been Chakra's general manager since August 2009.

But Ciszak, who is now a part-owner of Chakra, doesn't think you should care about anyone's résumé. Nor does he want you to regard Chakra as an intimidating food-snob restaurant.

Chakra * 1/2**

144 Route 4 west, Paramus; 201-556-1530

chakrarestaurant.com

Food: Eclectic New American – creative, deftly prepared dishes showcasing excellent ingredients.

Ambience: A dramatic, dim room with couch banquettes, Cambodian reliefs and a lit waterfall.

Service: Confident and authoritative.

Value: Though prices are high, the value is good, given the quality. Appetizers \$8 to \$17, entrees \$15 to \$38.

Would be good for: A well-rounded night out with excellent food, drink and over-the-top atmosphere.

Less appropriate for: Anyone who may prefer simpler food, lower prices or a less trendy ambience.

Recommended dishes: Yellowfin tuna tartare, grilled Portuguese octopus, Wiener schnitzel, Goffle Road chicken "Thanksgiving style," chili-cinnamon glazed Chilean sea bass, coffee and doughnuts dessert.

Hours: 5 to 10 p.m. Monday through Wednesday (lounge menu until 11 p.m.), 5 to 11 p.m. Thursday through Saturday (lounge menu until midnight). Bar open later.

Liquor, wine: Extensive wine list, specialty cocktails.

Noise level: Music grows louder later at night.

Credit cards: AE, D, MC, V.

Reservations: Recommended.

Accommodations for children: Items available on request.

Dress: Sophisticated casual.

Early-bird specials or deals: Weekday "bargain" plates.

Takeout: Yes.

Parking: Lot.

Reviewed: Dec. 3, 2010.

"People think, 'Now I can't go there, it's a fancy chef cooking there,' " he says. "But it's simple, good food. You don't need to be such a foodie. Just come and eat, it's going to be tasty."

And, "don't worry so much about why it's tasty."

This philosophy is why his menu simply calls the Goffle Road chicken "Thanksgiving-style" (\$25), making no mention of the fact that the breast and thigh get their astounding moistness from a sophisticated technique known as "sous vide," meaning they are vacuum-sealed and slow-cooked at a low temperature in a water bath.

It's why if you take a seat at Chakra, scan the menu and have dinner, you may not know that the heavenly Wiener schnitzel (\$28) is breaded to order and cooked in clarified butter, that the refreshing tuna tartare (\$14) is mixed with high-end lemon oil, that all the pastas are now house-made, that the pumpkin salad (\$10) combines Austrian pumpkin seed oil with Asian spices, or that the crunchy-creamy peanut dacquoise dessert (\$10) was conceived from a dinner Cizak was invited to cook in Kyoto, Japan.

You also may not care. You'll just know that the food is good.

And boy, is it. I didn't expect to be quite so impressed by tender octopus in a white bean purée cut with bitter arugula and lemon juice (\$14). The same went for two top sellers carried over from Copeland: a beautiful Chilean sea bass fillet with gentle sweet and salty flavors of chili, cinnamon and lemongrass, alongside a crispy potato-wrapped shrimp (\$34), and a horseradish-crusting crab cake, which was virtually only lump crab (\$15).

There was one big miss: Cizak's signature "TC Steak," a 40-day wet-aged Colorado sirloin steak that arrived surprisingly tough, especially for \$38. (Full disclosure: The table next to us had two such steaks and lots of loud raves.)

Cizak's desserts are refined (an intense Valhrona chocolate brioche pudding, \$10), rustic (a quince and heirloom apple cobbler with a quite hard and thick crust tucked into a tiny skillet, \$9) and playful (three light, fluffy doughnuts with a little chicory iced coffee drink complete with straw, \$10). The same range can be said for the specialty cocktails (\$12), overseen by Evelyn Cizak (a sommelier), which feature everything from lychee purée to bacon-infused bourbon to habañero-infused tequila.

Chakra has long had very deft waiters who are familiar with the dishes, and the ones who served us this time around were no exception. The pacing predictably slowed once the restaurant became packed (around 8 p.m.), though our wait for food was nothing like the interminable delays we faced here a few years ago.

The restaurant has also never suffered for visual points of interest, though its famous waterfall wasn't running during our visits (it occasionally gets serviced for calcium buildup). And now it has a new one: Peek into the wine room as you head down the hallway to the restrooms and you'll see the hanging meats curing away in the cool temperature, headed for Chakra's \$17 charcuterie platter.

Chakra's prices remain high. If you come in and eat three courses, you're probably looking at a minimum of \$50 a person, and that's before drinks, tax and tip. But identical price tags are all over North Jersey, many of them for nowhere near the quality of ingredients or the level of cooking going on here, so in that respect the restaurant is an excellent buy.

Another thing to note is that unlike restaurants where the staff seems insulted when you don't order a lot of food, our waitress seemed surprised when we actually ordered appetizers, entrées and desserts. Ciszak says that he's trying to encourage people to come in on a weeknight for a beer and Wiener schnitzel, or for one of his Monday through Friday bargains like a Cobb salad and cosmo for \$20.

What would I do? Come in late at night for a Nutty Pear cocktail and a side of hand-cut fries (\$8), done the right way — soaked, blanched, flash-fried and served with aioli in a fun little fry basket. Style — and substance, too.