



Let there be light

Dena Marino's MC Kitchen finds a home in the Design District.



The dining room at MC Kitchen in Miami's Design District. (MC Kitchen / Courtesy / March 13, 2013)

A big window in the bright, high-ceilinged dining room offers a view of the kitchen. The lighting, chairs, tables and three-dimensional mural on the wooden wall are all worthy of MC Kitchen's location on the ground floor of a building filled with design stores.

While Caesar salad (\$12) is hardly Italian, Marino's version is transcendent. The creamy dressing has just the right amount of garlic. The croutons provide the right crunch. The white anchovies provide a savory saltiness. She fills burrata cheese with roasted squash (\$15) and creates a new kind of creamy magic. It was plated with arugula and saba vinaigrette. Halibut crudo (\$16) is all about lemon, salt, thinly sliced fish and shaved hearts of palm and baby artichokes. Remarkable. Roasted octopus (\$17) is a marvel on its own, but the accompanying black risotto cake takes it to an even better place.

A special of the day, crispy soft-shell crab (\$27) with roasted-corn puree, was set atop a watercress salad with mango, corn and avocado.

Garganelli Bolognese (\$18) combines the pennelike pasta shape with a sauce made of ground veal, venison, pork and porcini mushrooms. It had a nice flavor, but the sauce was oversalted.

Marino's Heritage Breed Poulet Rouge (\$26) with Meyer lemon pan jus was the kind of post-card chicken dish you wish every restaurant would serve. It was perfectly cooked and seasoned. In a photo, I saw it served with a fried egg on top, but mine came without. This was just as well, as it would have added an unnecessary richness.

Grouper (\$32) is braised and served alongside a fennel-infused sausage, rapini and something called New England clam sauce. Altogether, the flavors teeter on Thai. There's also simple snapper with leek puree and three-bean salad (\$32), braised grouper in clam sauce with sausage and rapini (\$32) and pan-seared halibut (\$34) with Meyer lemon whipped potatoes and prosciutto-wrapped asparagus.

Meat dishes arrive with a thud. A New York strip steak (\$37) was tough as flank steak. The meat itself was underseasoned. We'd have sent it back, but we didn't want to upset the flow of dinner. Not even the very good rosemary steak fries or garlic spinach could help this cut along. A new meat purveyor is in order.

My co-diner ordered her Colorado rack of lamb (\$36) and asked that it be "pink, not red." That means medium rare where I come from. But it arrived blood rare. We sent it back, and it came back with that weird char that comes from being set under a broiler. But it was still too rare. Our waiter offered to take it back one more time. But how many times can meat be reheated until a guest is offered a new rack?

While that was a bad call, the service here is quite good. Between food runners and busboys and our waiter, we felt the pampering that comes with a night out in a nice restaurant.

Be sure to save room for Redlands strawberry brown-butter tart (\$9). The pastry is divine. Speaking of pastry, how does this sound: Meyer lemon curd polenta torta with blueberry compote and whipped cream (\$9)? The vanilla gelato and strawberry balsamic glaze provide just the right contrast. Chocolate mousse (\$9) gets a whole lot more intriguing with the addition of spicy hazelnuts. The mingling of sweet and savory gets even better in coconut panna cotta (\$9), with brown figs and marsala sauce.

My favorite Italian food is the kind you'd probably never recognize as Italian. No meatballs. No red sauce. Just the freshest ingredients, simply prepared.

So when I heard Dena Marino was doing just this sort of light, modern Italian at her MC Kitchen in Miami's Design District, I knew I'd be there.

Marino came to South Florida to cook at Danny DeVito's now shuttered Miami Beach restaurant, and four months ago opened MC Kitchen in November with Brandy Coletta, a former colleague from Aspen, Colo., and the "C" in MC. While in Aspen, Marino was declared the next best thing by every national food magazine in the country.

Now, South Florida has a chance to see what all the fuss is about. My only recommendation is that Marino pay more attention to meat.

On a Saturday night, the 145-seater is filled with the kind of affluent crowd every restaurateur covets. Let's just say there's a lot of very good cosmetic surgery and jewelry on display. Prada, Cartier and Hermes stores are just down the street. And I'd say MC Kitchen is in the right place at the right time, as the Design District morphs into what some are hoping will become Miami's Rodeo Drive.

