

Inovasi constantly innovating with local ingredients

NICKI KOETTING, Editor

Inovasi has offered its customers more than 3,500 dishes since the restaurant opened at 28 E. Center Ave. in Lake Bluff six years ago.

And not one of those dishes has appeared on the menu again.

John des Rosiers, the owner of Inovasi — which means “innovation” in Indonesian — said that the reason he and Matt DuBois, the head chefs of the establishment, craft two to three new dishes each week is “because we’re bored, honestly.”

“It’s not just that we change [the menu] seasonally — which I think is kind of easy,” des Rosiers said. “But it’s a constant rotation of new ideas in and out all the time. There are dishes that come on the menu for a month or two, and then [they’re] gone again.”

The revolving-door menu at Inovasi is not just due to the owner’s impatience, however. Inovasi prides itself on using only locally grown food — defined by des Rosiers as coming from within 100 miles of the restaurant. Its pigs are from Michigan, and the cows from which the restaurant buys its beef live in Iowa; most of the restaurant’s ingredients are grown in 45 farms located in those states, as well as Illinois and Wisconsin.

A list of the farms the restaurant uses can be found on the Inovasi menu and website.

The restaurant also has a garden on its roof, which grows hard squashes, cucumbers, 15 kinds of tomatoes, eight types of salad greens, root vegetables and a plethora of fruits that feed Inovasi’s customers every week.

“Anything we can think of, we put it there and grow,” des Rosiers said.

INOVASI

28 E. Center Ave., Lake Bluff

(847) 295-1000

www.inovasi.us

Lunch: 11:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m., Monday-Friday

Dinner: 5:30-close, Monday-Saturday

But the seasonal focus of the restaurant means that when a vegetable isn’t growing here in the Midwest, Inovasi’s customers won’t be eating it, unless the restaurant pickled or dehydrated it last fall.

“We don’t get things here all year long like [other places] do,” des Rosiers said.

He added that the restaurant not only seeks to be environmentally sustainable but also supportive of the farming communities around it.

“Most restaurants, when they have asparagus in January, spend twice as much money for the asparagus and they bring it in from Peru,” des Rosiers said. “I don’t think that’s a good way to eat vegetables. It’s certainly not sustainable. It’s not good for our environment to fly [in] vegetables from halfway around the world six months of the year.

“The way our menu changes is the way people have eaten for all of human history. It’s only been the last 80 to 90 years where you [can get ingredients] out of season. Nobody ate asparagus or tomatoes in January ever before, until fairly recently. ... We have an amazing bunch of farmers who grow incredible stuff you can’t get anywhere, and we should use them.”

And, des Rosiers added: “Everything we buy tastes better than buying it from other sources. Our food inherently starts off better than



Inovasi’s dry-aged New York strip (\$18) is sourced from Iowa and served with miso teriyaki, asparagus and crispy onion. PHOTOS BY MATT YAN/22ND CENTURY MEDIA

what we would get from far away places.”

When asked if having to perpetually invent new entrees is exhausting, des Rosiers laughed and said, “For me, no, [but] for our customers — all the time. They hate it.

“They come in and say, ‘Why can’t you bring this back or that back.’ Our answer is: All the things you’ve fallen in love with, they’ve replaced something else before. If we don’t constantly innovate and constantly try to replace things on the menu, we won’t get to the next thing that you’re going to fall in love with.”

Last week, *The Northbrook Tower* Editor Matt Yan, Assistant Editor Riley Simpson and I prepared ourselves to fall in love with Inovasi’s dishes of the week, although we knew that we probably wouldn’t see them again except on this page.

For the first of our four courses, we tried three items on the “snacks” menu — the papas bravas (\$7), crispy smashed potatoes tossed with Parmesan cheese, spices and lime, served with a salsa verde dipping sauce; the house-made sausage (\$9), grilled pork and dry-aged beef sausage, served

with pickled vegetables, leek oil and mustard aioli; and the grilled cheese sandwich (\$9), made with a Jacobs & Bricford Everton alpine-style cheese, rubbed with fresh garlic and served with a house mustard.

The papas bravas had a nice kick and were crispy and delicious. The sausage tasted very fresh and the meat seemed well-mixed.

Yan particularly loved the grilled cheese, and all the dipping sauces — the salsa and the mustards — were a tasty addition to the appetizers.

Next up was the Klug Farm asparagus (\$14), served with grilled local ramps, poached rhubarb chunks and sprinkled with a spring beet and yogurt vinaigrette; the Heritage Breed pork loin (\$12), roasted and served with baby turnips, young radish and a citrus-shallot agrodolce; and the crispy tempura cod (\$15), served with a whipped caramelized cauliflower spread, charred cucumbers, toasted pumpernickel croutons and a lemon puree.

The asparagus salad was light and fresh, and the grilled ramps added a smoky flavor to the veggies. The pork loin was a little sweet



The Chicken and the Egg dish (\$19) is chicken served with braised hearty greens, asparagus, a crispy soft-poached egg and truffle lemon aioli.



The house-made sausage (\$9) contains grilled pork and dry-aged beef sausage alongside pickled vegetables, leek oil and mustard aioli.

and tangy, and the cauliflower puree was unique and a welcome change to the fried cod.

We were then served the dry-aged New York strip (\$18), which was served with miso teriyaki, asparagus and onion, and a Chicken and the Egg entree (\$19) — chicken served with a crispy soft-poached egg, asparagus and a truffle lemon aioli.

The meat — which was marinated expertly — melted in my mouth, and although I was stuffed, I was left wanting more.

Last, but certainly not least, we were served dessert. First was a dark chocolate bundino (\$11) — chocolate sponge cake served with

peanut butter toffee crumble and buttermilk sherbert — and strawberries served with homemade marshmallows and butterscotch.

The dessert disappeared almost instantly and was a sweet end to a delicious meal.

Although Inovasi’s menu is always impermanent, des Rosiers said that the restaurant will feature its 25 “best hits” from the past six years for two weeks this fall.

Inovasi is open for lunch on Mondays through Fridays from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. and opens for dinner Monday through Saturday at 5:30 p.m. For more information, call (847) 295-1000 or visit www.inovasi.us.