

# Party On

## Mosaic's food is a blast, but the servers don't seem to feel the celebratory vibe

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My dinner at **Mosaic** was yummy, but it felt a little like those first two hours of a party, before the clock strikes half-past fashionably late, when it doesn't yet feel like a party and you're wondering if anybody's going to show up.

### Worth the wait: Mosaic's delightful food gets the party started right.

One glance and you know all the elements for a blowout bash are in place. Located in loft central a block off Washington Avenue, the three-month-old restaurant looks, well, swell -- a chic, eye-pleasing mix of black tables, exposed ductwork, high ceilings, tall windows and a curvaceous



### INSIDE THE OCTOBER ISSUE

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freestanding bar. Off to one side, between the open-air kitchen and the hallway leading to the johns, colored spotlights traipse across a tile mosaic in rhythm with the soft club beats bleating from the sound system at just the right let's-get-it-started volume. Beneath that striking display of wall art, a row of Bunsen burner-style candelabra

anchors a small lounge area swanked out with seating pillows along a bamboo bench and a pair of lounge chairs: a little pit of love and fire, the spot where you just know the throngs will cluster once things get under way.

Better still, this is a tapas restaurant -- or "fusion tapas," as Mosaic bills its offerings. Given the pan-ethnic liberties taken by pretty much every new restaurant nowadays (Spring rolls on a bistro menu? Sure! Cream cheese-and-mayo sushi roll? Bring it!), who really knows or cares what is or isn't defined by such a phrase. Indigenously, *tapas* are traditional Spanish appetizers -- stuff like blood sausage, marinated meats on slices of bread, tripe casserole, prawns in vinegar -- served at a tavern amid boisterous company and washed down with wine. Nowadays, the term means making a reservation at the latest, coolest eatery and stuffing your face one devil-may-care saucerful after the next. Either way, you're looking at a good time.

The spread Mosaic laid out for our party of seven, selected from a menu of two dozen hot and cold tapas items (plus a quintet of salads), was incredibly delish. Short-rib ravioli paired nicely firm pasta with chuck meat that had been braised into supple submission. The preparation spoke

well of the kitchen, top-dogged by executive chef and newly minted St. Louisan Claus Schmitz, a Sydney native and veteran of European and Australian elegance in cooking. Pasta can easily wind up overboiled -- especially in a kitchen that's working so many ingredients and culinary styles at once -- and short ribs, a tough cut, require patient, attentive cooking. But not here.



House-named potstickers boasted sturdy wrappers engorged with mouthfuls of tender suckling-pig meat, while rabbit potpie featured more deliciously braised meat, this time nestled within a lighter-than-air puff pastry shell. Rounding out our affair with stuffed stuff: calamari bursting at the seams with spicy chorizo and a potato hash.

That calamari led off a string of splendid seafood items. Tuna tartare, peeking out from beneath a downy blanket of *mâche*, was delightful, as were hefty freshwater prawns plated on a bed of seaweed salad and a tomato ragout. More seaweed dressed up oysters on the half shell, dramatically presented atop a seascape of kosher salt dyed blue with *curaçao*. The seaweed gave an unexpected kick to the mollusks, lending additional salty ocean goodness and a nifty mouth-feel. The oysters were accompanied by a trio of dipping sauces (curry mayo, a soy-sesame concoction and a classic mignonette sauce), which were cute but amounted to overkill -- you don't want more than a few drops of cocktail sauce or lemon juice competing with raw oysters. The single seafood misfire was a piece of tuna tempura, unfortunately sunk in *dashi*, a Japanese broth made with bonito flakes that soaked all the crispness from the tempura and much of the fragile taste out of the tuna.

Mosaic's Caesar salad (of all things) proved a showstopper. Dubbed "classic" on the menu, it was more accurately Dada-esque: a single, massive, intact head of romaine lettuce, draped in dressing and propped horizontally upon a row of three crouton bricks. Though the dressing tasted a bit too sweet (it could almost qualify as icing), the Caesar's daring appearance made it a conversation piece -- like something Marcel Duchamp might have entered into a Paris art show, circa 1917.

A frisée salad, with its can't-miss flavor-and-texture combos -- warmed goat cheese, toasted walnuts and pear vinaigrette -- was another crowd-pleaser. So were a number of classic, heaven-sent culinary majesties done right, including gnocchi (doctored here with asparagus tips and a truffled asparagus sauce), risotto (seasoned with Parmesan and a flowery hit of saffron) and a caprese salad (slices of red tomato and fresh mozzarella vamped up with a pungent one-two punch of basil leaves and a basil-pesto dressing). Even humble Bermuda onion rings -- though slightly out of place amid worldlier fare -- tasted fantastic, employing just the right quantity of oil to coax out the onion's nimble sweetness.

In fact, only one item elicited frowns all around: the beef carpaccio, which was too salty. But far more mood-killing was the awkwardly paced service. Tapas are tricky that way: Enough plates have to hit at once so that everybody can dive in, and subsequent orders must arrive in timely

fashion to keep up the pace. Still, a fine time was had by all. With a few fine-tuning tweaks in service and presentation, the party at Mosaic is poised to kick in.