



Executive Chef Dominic Ainza

Fusion is Another Word for Wonderful

By Christina Dunham

Out of this world treats await at Mercury Lounge.

Funk in the Trunk, \$2 Tuesdays, East Meets West Wine Wednesday, Thirsty Thursdays, Fernet Fridays.

If you happen to stumble into Mercury Restaurant & Lounge on 12th and Folsom Streets in San Francisco between 5:00 and 8:00 p.m., these are the theme events that will help ease you out of work mode, and get you in the mood for a good time.

Originally located in the Marina neighborhood on Lombard Street, Mercury moved from its long and narrow 1,300 square foot location to the heart of the SoMa District six months ago, occupying what once was funky burger joint, Hamburger Mary's.

With Executive Chef Dominic Ainza at the helm, Mercury's sleek Pan Asian-fusion

restaurant and lounge areas have served as backdrop for several private and corporate events, including Citizen Hope's mixers and a Google division's Holiday 2008 Party.

"What differentiates us from other cuisines is that we stay true to what Asian cooking has to offer. For us our food is defined by a few standards in mind—that we are using ingredients that can be found in Asia, we are cooking with Asian techniques, or a combination of both," says Dominic.

He explains, "For example, our eggplant *adobo*, we make the sauce ahead of time and we then quick fry the eggplant, then add the eggplant to the wok, then wok toss it with the sauce. This is a very typical Chinese technique, yet the end result is a

Filipino product. That's what global Asian cuisine is, bringing different cooking techniques, mixing it with traditional and non-traditional items and coming out with a specific and unique food, but yet is still strongly Asian in origin. Some call it fusion, but when I think of fusion, it means using traditional European techniques, with non-traditional ingredients. My version is taking Chinese or Vietnamese or other Asian techniques and mixing with the multitude of different Asian ingredients."

Asked what prompted him to get into the restaurant business, Dominic is a little stumped. A graduate of the prestigious California Culinary Academy in San Francisco, he says he originally attended cooking school because he simply wanted to learn

how to cook, “So that I could enjoy restaurant-quality food at home. My training is classic French techniques, because that was the curriculum that was being taught. But I was also introduced to many different techniques from different regions around the world as well in school.”

As with many Filipino families, food is central to many celebrations. “In our family, we started a tradition that everyone under 40 years old cooks for Thanksgiving, and the over-40 cook for Christmas. Usually we prepare traditional American for Thanksgiving, and traditional Filipino for Christmas. It’s always exciting to see what new young cooks will be preparing.”

Dominic adds, “I didn’t want to work in the kitchen. I was hoping to do recipe-testing for a magazine or some company. Restaurant work was furthest from my mind, even until the last day of school.” But an internship was required for graduation, so he bravely approached Betel Nut, an award-winning Southeast Asian restaurant on the Union Street strip in the Marina.

“[My internship at Betel Nut] opened up a whole new world for me. Working with Chef Alex Ong and the different sous chefs like Daniel Sudar made me want to become one myself. Everything I know about Asian cuisine and the restaurant business started there.” And the rest, as they say, is history.

After three years with Betel Nut, Dominic went on to become the opening Sous Chef for Poleng Lounge, another well-regarded contemporary Filipino/Pan-Asian restaurant in San Francisco, under Executive Chef Tim Lyum. “Dom was a huge influence on me,” says Chef Tim, who has kept many of Dominic’s culinary creations on the menu.

Prior to running Mercury Lounge full-time, Dominic also served as Sous Chef for Michelin Guide-recommended Red Lantern in Redwood City. There, he reunited with Daniel Sudar, now the Executive Chef responsible for the restaurant’s highly acclaimed Pacific Rim cuisine.

At Mercury, Dominic opted to create a menu that includes food that can be cooked

fresh and quickly. No pre-cooked or “fresh frozen” to be found here. “If I could, I would include food that takes a long time, like *kare-kare* and other stews, fresh out of a pot. I would love for a customer to walk in and tell me they want *kare-kare*, with tripe. Then they would sit for three hours to wait for it. I would put oxtail and tripe in its own pot to stew for two to three hours, and when the meat is done simmering, combine the rest of the ingredients together using fresh peanuts, toasted rice powder, and fresh vegetables. Nothing like a fresh cooked pot of food.”

A sampling from Mercury’s Spring 2009 menu includes items like Crispy Salt and Pepper Sea Bass, Drunken Honey Walnut Prawns, Sweet Potato Fries with Sricacha Mayo Dip, Garlic Tamarind Glazed Short Ribs, Filipino favorites like Sizzling Grilled Sisig, and my personal pick, Crab Curry Fried Rice with Chinese Sausage. Perhaps if you had the patience, you can add *Kare-Kare* to this list. ■

Romaine Chicken Salad

Ingredients

Dressing

- 1/2 cup soy sauce
- 1/2 cup rice wine vinegar
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1/4 cup sesame oil

Mix in a bowl all ingredients together until sugar dissolves.

Crispy Noodles

- 1 small package sotanghon noodles (bean thread)
- 2 cups oil

Heat up the oil in a fry pan until just about to smoke. (Be prepared this will happen fast.) Drop about half the package of noodles. It should pop up, quickly turn it



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over, for a few seconds, then pull it out, and let drain on a paper towel. Break into small pieces.

Salad

- 2 heads of romaine hearts, cut to 1/4 in pieces
- 1/4 bunch of cilantro, cut to 1/4 in strands
- 1/2 carrot julienne sliced, fine
- 1 cooked chicken breast, shredded
- 1/4 cup slivered almonds

5 pieces of dried mangos, chopped

Directions

Place all the ingredients into a mixing bowl and toss well, making sure everything is well distributed. Stir or shake the dressing (when the dressing sits, the sesame oil ends up at the top) Add about 1/4 cup of dressing, and toss the salad to incorporate the dressing, then finish by adding some of the fried noodles, then toss one last time. ■