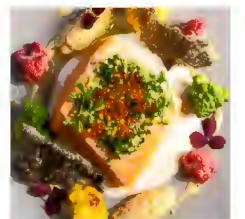
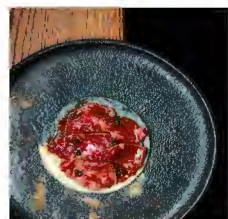
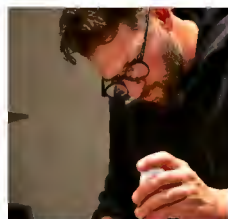
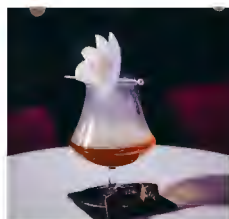


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OKTA

ONE OF OREGON'S TOP DINING DESTINATIONS

| BY TRACY ELLEN BEARD

Ökta, located in the Tributary Hotel in McMinnville, Oregon, opened in July 2022. Fame came early when *The New York Times* included it in its 2023 list of the 50 best restaurants in the United States. Michelin-starred Chef Matthew Lightner, the former Portland, Oregon, Castagna chef who moved to New York City in 2011 to open Atera, which earned two Michelin stars, has returned to the Willamette Valley to showcase and celebrate what the local region has to offer.

Ökta Farm and Larder

On my recent visit to McMinnville, my daughter Brittney and I toured the ökta farm and larder with General Manager Christine Langelier, who said, “Our philosophy on farming is regenerative practices, but it is really all about collaboration and communication with the restaurant and the hotel.”

Chef Lightner oversees the planting and management of the farm. He works with Christine, Chef Larry Nguyen in the larder, and farmer Saruh Wynes to grow the produce he wants to use in his dishes at ökta. The collaboration begins in the nursery during the last weeks of December and into the first weeks of January. During this time, the team figures out what they will need in the next six weeks, in the spring, summer, and into the fall.

Depending on the maturity rate of different seeds, some produce is ready to harvest in a month or two. In contrast, other seeds need to be in the ground much longer and will not be ready for harvest for several months but will then be available for future menus.

Chef Lightner and the kitchen team are in constant communication with Saruh, who has a strong background as a bean farmer. She uses that knowledge to grow various types of produce, but also plants beans to add nutrients

back into the terroir. These beans are harvested to make miso in the larder.

Christine said, “The idea of our larder is not about preserving what is going bad. We pick things in the field when they are at their prime so that they bring the best flavors into the fermentation process. For instance, our Jimmy Nardello peppers were picked at their peak during the summer, cured for the entire fall, and then placed on the winter menu. We often overproduce something in the garden, and because of that overproduction, we are able to work with it in the larder and put something wonderful on the menu six months later.”

Having a restaurant farm allows Chef Lightner to serve what is in season at that moment. At the same time, Chef Larry gets a variety of produce to preserve, alter, and use to create new ingredients by using ancient and modern fermentation techniques. His end products are used to flavor food for today’s menu and future dishes. Christine shared, “What Chef Larry creates is kind of the salt and pepper of ökta. We don’t use salt and pepper like most people do. We season the food through preserved ingredients by taking the salinity from a product and using it to add saltiness along with other additional flavors.”

Okta – A Dining Extravaganza

Brittney and I enjoyed ökta’s tasting menu, which consisted of six snack bites and ten courses paired with seven wines. One of our first dishes was a Rouge de Bordeaux crepe topped with mushrooms and Perigord truffle accompanied by a delicious cup of roasted chicken broth. The crepe was soft, exhibited an uber mushroom flavor, and only took two bites to consume. These dishes were paired with a tasty Champagne Colin, which has a beautiful pink color from pinot noir grapes.

One of our favorite courses of the night was a housemade tart shell filled with a caramelized sunchoke puree and topped with spiny lobster tossed in a preserved Jimmy Nardello pepper aioli. This dish arrived paired with a glass of

Alvinte, a Spanish Albarino that exhibited great salinity, acidity, and brightness.

The mussels were another favorite; they were the plumpest, best-textured mussels I have ever tasted. They were cooked in their own broth and served in a butter reduction.

In between the different courses, we received several beautiful cards with photos and information paying homage to local farmers, vintners, and the native people.

The wild-caught flounder, served with watermelon, purple, and Spanish black radishes, sat on top of fermented puffed buckwheat. The buckwheat added a fantastic texture, and the delicious dish was paired with a glass of sake from Southern Japan. The soft water in this area of Japan made the sake light and pretty with less minerality.

The lightly smoked sturgeon caviar on top of savory kohlrabi custard, collard greens, and pine vinegar served with a polenta brioche roll and butter with sea salt was exceptional, and the crab and black cod dishes were tasty and Instagram-worthy.

After more delicious courses, a palate cleanser made of rhubarb and wild ginger cream with kombu arrived. It was sweet and tart and oh-so-yummy.

My favorite dessert was the Naked Bear pumpkin ice cream with praline chocolate cake, barbecued parsnip milk, and crunchy pumpkin seeds. I gave this dish a 10+ rating as it offered a gorgeous mix of textures, was well-balanced, and nicely salted.

Dinner at ökta is a well-thought-out, beautiful, tasty, and professionally executed experience. As Christine explained, “The ethos behind our hospitality is that we want to surround you with it even though you do not know it is coming. We want to hit you with it from all sides.” The underlying philosophy behind the Tributary Hotel, ökta, and ökta farm and larder is about sharing the local terroir—its bounty, history, spirit, and people. ❖