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## Wild Magnolia Blooms in Orinda

By A.K. Carroll



The inside of Wild Magnolia in Orinda. Photos Travis Setterbo

Restaurant mogul Michael Karp is at it again. After scrapping the tequila passports, unstoppable guac and high-end Mexican entrees of Theater Square's Barbacoa and opening business casual taproom and comfort food eatery The Fourth Bore last fall, Karp has moved a few doors down and taken out six-year resident Table 24. Almost a year to the date since The Fourth Bore renovation, Karp closed his catchall neighborhood restaurant and reopened it as Wild Magnolia.

The name is a tribute to Karp's college days in New Orleans and to the Mardis Gras Indian tribe that plays and records music under the same name. Inspired by the NOLA Wild Magnolias, this low-lit space is meant to contrast The Fourth Bore while honoring an appreciation for music and food. "I'm just sort of celebrating those undertones," said Karp. "To weave that culture into the basis of what we're doing."

The new concept opened Thanksgiving weekend (mere weeks after Table 24 closed), and three months in, still seems to be finding its feet. On entering the building, you get the feeling that the transition is somewhat still in progress. The walls have been stripped down and splashed in deep gray, booths reupholstered and tables clothed in simple white cloths; reclaimed windows provide a soft barrier to what was and remains an open kitchen. But much like a teenager dressing for prom, remnants of the restaurant's former life still linger: reclaimed bleacher seats framing the bar, a screen on the wall, bright red and white tile across the whole of the kitchen. Much of the space remains barren of detailed decor, aside from a spindly white tree that hearkens to Christmas and an impressionist painting of a few bright guitars—the only real suggestion that the restaurant has a musical undertone.

But while Wild Magnolia's overall vibe may still be emerging, the culinary offerings (directed by creative partner Dianna Condon and executed by Chef Sasha Zukanoff from Karp's Oakland Forge) have clearly already spent some time in incubation. Somewhat to my surprise, the menu is almost entirely classic and contemporary American. There are a few hints at Southern inspiration, including a perfectly balanced gumbo and a decadent bread pudding, but by-and-large the fare is typical date night fodder: seared salmon, roasted chicken, a few flatbreads and a bevy of salads. If Wild Magnolia were a woman, she'd almost certainly invite you to girls' night out.

While not terribly exciting, the dishes are excellently executed, all the way down to the crispy thin fries, which I highly suggested soaking in the garlic wine butter sauce that's comes with an order of sizable mussels. Other small plates include marinated olives, sautéed mushrooms, and a cheese and charcuterie board. Not exactly kid food, and intentionally so.

There's a selection of specialty cocktails, which are neither stiff nor terribly impressive, but the beers are well-chosen and the wine list is fair. (If you're going for bubbles, pick the Prosecco over the Veuve). Salads are fresh, even inventive. The Wild Magnolia, a salad that's more shredded than tossed, is a delicious balance of acidic onion, bitter endive, and sweet candied pecans touched with potent bleu cheese and a balsamic vinaigrette. Entrees are sizable, even sharable, and generously paired, but while the seared wild salmon melded beautifully with a side comprised of fennel butter, mire poix and farro, the wild mushroom risotto and petite filet seemed to share a plate and nothing more. On my visit the filet was unevenly cooked (bloody in the center and dry on the edge), so I passed it to my partner and stole the salmon for myself.

Service was outstanding from start to finish, and the finish was rather lovely as well. A short list of sweets includes a chocolate pot de crème, strawberry apple crumble topped with a generous scoop of gelato, and a bourbon bread pudding (also topped with gelato) that's destined for Instagram fame. Bread pudding is typically my "go to" for leftover baguettes, loaves, and even hot dog buns. I've made many a fine batch, but none as delicious as the one at Wild Magnolia.

Though the concept still wants for a little unity and refinement, there's hope that Wild Magnolia will come into its own given some more time. Plans are in place for regular live music and a Sunday jazz brunch to roll out on the weekend. The walls are ripe for well-chosen artwork, and in the meantime the tables are covered with butcher paper and crayons. I suppose each of us still has a remnant of childhood in there somewhere.

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Wild Magnolia Salad



Wild Mushroom Risotto and Petit Filet

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