



## MOONRISE HOTEL

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# LUNAR DELIGHT

## DINING OUT—ECLIPSE

by t.j. MARTIN

**T**he new Moonrise Hotel in the U. City Loop includes a gourmet restaurant, Eclipse, on the ground floor. I wasn't sure what to expect, since the executive chef was imported from Blueberry Hill—burgers and buffalo wings?

No need for concern. Eclipse has several maestros in the kitchen, a couple from the former Shaved Duck, and the menu emphasizes both comfort food (bone-in pork chop) and creativity (lemon mascarpone risotto and English pea hash). The offerings are limited—about five appetizers, half a dozen soups and salads, and 10 entrees—but each shows thoughtfulness in pairings and preparation.

The restaurant is attractive, with a kind of Jetsons vibe. Black booths along the Delmar side butt up to a row of windows overlooking the street, and tables in the center are white laminate with blonde-wood barrel chairs and orange vinyl seats. At night, colored and clear lights inside the ceiling panels create an astral ambience.

The bread basket comes with a very good dipping olive oil with roasted garlic and red pepper flakes. On one visit, however, the bread was clearly not that-day fresh. An order of Moonrise ravioli (\$8) was excellent, if small, with five pasta pockets (using fresh-made pasta from Mangia in South City) folded into half-moons, lightly breaded and fried. You can get them filled with meat or spinach and cheese, our choice. The flavors of both pasta and filling were delicious, the filling not too cheesy and having a very good, buttery taste. The accompanying fennel and tomato slaw was interesting, with thinly shaved fennel and sliced fresh tomatoes heavily flavored by vinegar marinade.

A bowl of caramelized onion soup (\$7) was not as good. While it had a wonderful, thick crostini floating on top, the soup itself was so sweet as to be almost dessert-like. Things got back on track with the salt & pepper calamari (\$8), which was outstanding. The calamari was tender and flavorful, with a light semolina crust. Best of all were jalapeno pepper rings on top that somehow flavored every piece with their distinctive heat.

Our entrees were lobster pot pie (\$22), trout a la planche (\$24) and fleur de sel steak (\$26). Before you get too excited about lobster for \$22, I should explain that although the dish was very good and contained some nice chunks of lobster meat, these amounted to about one large claw. Also in the creamy, brandy-laced sauce were evenly cubed gold potatoes, slices of fresh carrot and peas. The



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PHOTO BY IRENE VAN SCHRIJCK

pie's 'crust' was two pieces of puff pastry shaped like half-moons—in honor of the hotel, of course.

The steak, a large rib-eye, was also quite good. Helping to bring out its natural flavor was a liberal coating of fleur de sel, making the meat tender and juicy. The dish came with a version of creamed spinach that was a big improvement over the pureed, overly creamy concoction usually served. Leaves of fresh baby spinach were lightly tossed with cream and wild mushrooms. That mushroom flavor really popped in the cream.

Trout a la planche (\$24), ruby trout cooked on a plank, was also good. It came beautifully browned on the outside and moist inside, accompanied by one of the evening's best treats: spring mushroom mash, a mix of fresh English peas, mushrooms and browned potato cubes in butter.

The desserts are made in-house, except for the ice-creams (Serendipity). We chose the Moon pie, made with house-made marshmallow and chocolate ganache (\$6) and chai panna cotta (\$7), which was quite a bit creamier than the typical half 'jello,' half custard. It had a pleasant clove flavor that was not overpowering, and the moon pie, a 4-inch disk of layered graham crust, marshmallow and chocolate, was good and not too sweet or rich.

What I like about Eclipse is that it can be what you want it to be. You can stop in for drinks, nibbles or dinner, and get a bird's eye view of bustling Delmar Boulevard. There are several entrees costing in the mid-teens, another plus. Our service was slow, a minus, especially considering it wasn't all that busy and there were plenty of servers. But the food is tasty and inventive, and with its quirky showcases of robots, ray guns and spaceships, there is no other place like it in the Loop—or anywhere else. ✦



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