

Wolfgang Puck's The Source: Upstairs and downstairs

Contributed by Elana Schor
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An affordable bar and lounge created by Wolfgang Puck, the Austrian master of haute cuisine, may strike some Washingtonians as heretical - like Ralph Lauren wearing ripped jeans. But the downstairs space at The Source, Puck's new split-level spot on Pennsylvania Avenue, puts ordinary bars to shame.

The décor is pure minimalist chic courtesy of Northern California's ultra-hip Engstrom Design Group, with warm light cast by geometric fixtures that resemble miniature Pop Art chandeliers. Slim spears of brushed metal divide the lounge into sections, giving two or three tables their own semi-private cavern shielded from the echo of neighbouring groups.

The resulting mood is upscale without too much pretension and unexpectedly romantic, particularly at the L-shaped couches at the back of the room and the long rustic table with high-backed chairs. Budding couples already can be spotted bumping knees and sharing sips from each other's drinks.

Speaking of drinks, the cocktail menu consists of not one but two promising lists. Ginger lovers will have a tough time choosing between the spicy punch of a classic "dark and stormy," rich with rum and ginger beer, or the lighter notes of a ginger mojito riddled with fresh mint. Martini connoisseurs will be pleased to see no sickly-sweet fruit remakes of their staple and may even flock to the clean aroma of Puck's cucumber-sake version.

But the key to a successful bar experience lies in the guilty pleasures that help wash down a drink. And though Puck made his name on tiny designer plates that skinny celebrities love to nibble, he clearly knows his way around all-American chow.

The bite-sized hamburger dubbed a "slider," which already thrills capital palates at Matchbox and Tallula, rises to a new level at The Source's bar. Four sliders arrive in a soldierly row, no bigger than a child's fist but bursting at the seams with decadent flavor. Each tender, smoky patty of Kobe beef is generously topped with smoked onion marmalade, pickle and melted cheddar cheese on a buttery sesame-seed Brioche bun.

As if the sliders weren't enough to get a Beverly Hills supermodel salivating, skinny straws of tempura onion and steak-cut French fries are on hand to create a traditional bar-food duet. The harissa mustard that accompanies them is tastier than the average condiment without overdoing it on spice.

Pizza, the burger's adopted brother of American bar food, gets its own royal treatment from Puck, who creates some welcome distance from his bland and over-cheesed line of supermarket pies.

The prosciutto pizza floats an irresistible nip of fresh micro-arugula over luscious curls of mozzarella, and the sausage and goat cheese variety with leeks hides a knockout punch of wild mushrooms and creamier, almost nacho-style cheese beneath its surface. Puck's pizzaiolas have perfected the yeast-to-dough ratio in their crusts, a challenge that still stymies some area restaurants that devote their entire days to rolling pies.

Other standouts on the bar menu include ricotta and spinach gnocchi and thick house-made olive tapenade atop bruschetta that sparkles with burnt trails of goat cheese. But even if you're too overwhelmed to consider much beyond the sumptuous drink lists, dessert at The Source should be a no-brainer. For more on the sweet course, head upstairs to the main dining room …

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The art of fine dining is often linked with theater, whether literally - in the popularity of the pre-show meal - or figuratively, in the tendency of chefs to add drama to their signature dishes. And if restaurants are performances, then the upstairs restaurant at Wolfgang Puck's The Source is assuredly a big-budget epic.

Ascending the stairs from the bar area, the first thing you spy is the striking backlit chamber across the north wall, in which bottles of wine nestle like divas in their dressing rooms. The space has a design similar to that of the more relaxed lounge, with extra legroom that lends a hush even when the house is packed.

The production truly begins with the arrival of your servers, who tend to turn up the dial from attentive to nearly invasive. My companion and I were hardly chatterboxes during our visit, but we found it difficult to complete even a brief interchange before a server materialized at our side seeking instructions. We managed to undercut the strategy by taking a lengthy sojourn through the bowl of jade-green Szechuan string beans that we were offered in place of the traditional breadbasket.

Luckily, the beans were so out of this world that we enjoyed the distraction. Chef Scott Drewno, a veteran at the age of 32 after stints at Puck's Spago and Chinois in Las Vegas, layers a shock of crushed chili atop the dreamy sweetness of soy, making the simple amuse-bouche something to savor.

Drewno's skills with colorful Asian ingredients allow him to play with his choice of meats and vegetable, creating mostly blockbuster tastes.

An unbelievably tender cut of four-week-old suckling pig, layered into mosaics with plum chutney and pickled cipolini onions, hits the tongue like the best Southern pork barbecue on steroids. The pan-roasted red snapper served as a pre-entrée surprise twirled ballerina-style as the third server in a rotating cast bathed it in lemongrass-rich red curry.

But sometimes the stage gets a bit too crowded for The Source's audience to fully appreciate it. The warm lobster roll appetizer looked gorgeous, but the superior fish had an off-putting slimy texture from its daikon radish wrap. The "Hong Kong-style" salmon was the velvet-smooth wild king variety, though it lost some of its delicacy in the craze of a sauce dominated by garlic, chilies and ponzu.

The larger-than-life experience of The Source comes pleasantly down to earth with dessert, however. Options of a sorbet and ice cream tasting or a cookie sampler may appear low-maintenance, but the latter is an unexpected revelation. Each of its six cookies packs inventiveness and decadence into the smallest of packages, particularly the sunshine-dreamy yuzu bar and the caramel cashew bar that rolls in salt with sugar.

On the main dessert menu, the mango soufflé mingles the otherworldly tastes of frothy whipped egg white and tropical diced fruit, while the dark chocolate tart stuns with a caramelized crust beneath its bittersweet topping. Understatement is not The Source's forte - but as Hollywood proves year after year, epics often walk away with the most awards.

Wolfgang Puck's The Source
575 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W.
(202) 637-6100

Open for dinner 5:30-10 p.m., Mon-Thurs; 5:30-11 p.m., Fri-Sat. Closed Sun.
Rating: 4 domes

Bar and lounge open until 11 p.m. Mon-Thurs and 12 a.m. Fri-Sat.
Rating: 5 domes