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The Tavernization of Wisconsin Avenue NW

Why two upmarket restaurants reinvented themselves as comfort-food joints

By TIM CARMAN
POSTED: FEBRUARY 3, 2010

A year-and-a-half ago, back before anyone slapped the R word on our economy, the narrow storefront at 2404 Wisconsin Ave. NW still housed the second outlet of **Ceviche**, Mauricio Fraga-Rosenfeld's style-conscious restaurant that mixed designer cocktails with dressed-up plates of Peruvian fare. (Imagine *lomo saltado* with the fries stacked neatly to the side like Lincoln Logs rather than tossed helter-skelter with the beef strips, as is the custom in Peru.)



Tapped Out: Manson had to let go of his American-focused wine bar. (Darrow Montgomery)

Less than a mile up the road on Wisconsin, **Enology** had just opened its doors that same summer. Its three partners, including serial entrepreneur Joe Englert, were banking that the wine bar craze could accommodate one more variation—the All-American version, featuring varietals harvested exclusively in the United States. The concept was as pure as the setting in which those New World wines were poured, a stark white, almost clinical environment that gave off the impression you should wear surgical gloves to drink there.

Both places are now history. The owners have transformed their once-trendy establishments into warm and wood-heavy taverns, designed to serve the regular crowd (forever shuffling, it seems), not lure the Potomac or McLean elite out of their suburban cocoons so they can drop a couple hundred on dinner and a California cab or Peruvian pisco.

Even more telling, these owners pulled the plug quickly, as if willing to kill off their own entrepreneurial visions rather than watch them wither slowly on the vine. Ceviche was dispatched a short 16 months after opening, while Enology was given the injection just about 18 months after birth. Ceviche is now **Kitchen 2404**, a sort-of pan-Southern restaurant that's part of Fraga-Rosenfeld's affiliated group, Tavern Concepts. Enology is even more straightforward in its rebranding: The joint now goes by the name **Alliance Tavern**.

This tavernization, if you'll excuse the phrase, of former destination establishments seems like the obvious by-product of an economy in recession since December 2007, and I say exactly that to veteran consultant Joe Spinelli, who's opened more restaurants than I've probably dined in. Spinelli is a kind man; he suffers fools with half-formed theories. Sure, he explains, the current economic climate has rained down on fine-dining, white-tablecloth restaurants, forcing them to cling to life preservers. But most eateries fail, he says, not because their concepts are flimsy or their food flaccid but because the owners, looking for cheap rents, pick the wrong location.

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The southern edge of McLean Gardens?—was too young and too indifferent to a wine bar. “They’d come in at 8 and stop coming in at 10:30,” says Englert. “Do the math.”

Manson is even more blunt. The Culinary Institute of America graduate is a serious-minded enologist who’s also a partner in Veritas off Dupont Circle; Manson not only spent \$8,000 on each of five stainless-steel Le Sommelier wine taps/refrigeration units but also spent countless hours building out the vino list. “Enology is what I wanted, not what everyone else wanted,” he says.

Fraga-Rosenfeld could say almost the same thing about Ceviche in Glover Park. Opening a second location was a confirmation of the soundness of the Ceviche concept in Silver Spring as well as another chance to proselytize about the importance of Latin American culture, which is part of Latin Concepts’ mission. Fraga-Rosenfeld just couldn’t find many takers in the neighborhood.

“People didn’t care about Latin American food,” he says. “What I understood is that the neighborhood was looking for more comfort food, American comfort food, and I went for that.”

If there’s a common thread to the transformations of Kitchen 2404 and Alliance Tavern, it’s that both are new generation neighborhood restaurants. They’re not the places of yore where short order cooks thawed frozen patties for the evening’s burgers and cracked open cans of “fancy tomato sauce” to make plates of spaghetti. They’re not even neighborhood restaurants in the mold of Applebee’s or Ruby Tuesday (and what are chains if not a corporate usurpation of the local grill?), where giant foodservice trucks pull up to the back door and drop off the week’s supplies.

No, the Kitchen and Alliance are chef-driven operations, in which the men in white attempt to put their own stamps on a menu of seasonally focused American comfort dishes. Alex McCoy is the executive chef at Kitchen, and he’s the son of a Washington-area caterer, a guy who’s spent his whole life around food and cooking and restaurant kitchens. Alliance’s chef Johnny Nielsen arrives with even more bona fides; he’s a CIA graduate with stints in kitchens from New Orleans to D.C., including Dino in Cleveland Park and the now-defunct Bookbinders in Alexandria.

Of the two toques, I think Nielsen benefits most from his support team, which includes not only Manson on wine but also general manager Chris Cunningham who, as the former mixologist at Dino, still knows how to stir things up. Collectively, this trio has put together the oddest/bravest of taverns—a dimly lit sports bar with designer cocktails, Stachowski-brand charcuterie, and 68 (yes, 68) different wines by the glass. Manson just couldn’t sacrifice his Le Sommelier spigots for the greater glory of the Alliance. And did I mention that the physical space has been given a makeover, too? Its hand-tools-and-erector-set ambiance is designed to recall America’s last great economic crisis, the Great Depression and FDR’s equally great response, the Works Projects Administration.

Perhaps the WPA references are supposed to provide comfort in these hard times, but I’d prefer to seek my solace in Nielsen’s menu, which I find generally timid. The coating on his Tuesday night special of fried chicken was flat and underseasoned (although I really dug the concentrated jammy-ness of my Santa Digna Carmenere, which was the perfect partner for that gamey bird), and his roadhouse chili could stand the fire of a few more peppers. Still, Nielsen’s basil-pesto/mozzarella/roasted-tomato naan pizza is a bold bite, just the kind of smart re-imagining of bar food you’d like to see more of.

McCoy doesn’t appear to need as much support to make an impression, which is good because the Kitchen space exudes a slapdash Southern vibe and the beer/wine list is in dire need of reconstruction. While I mourned that my medium-rare Angus burger was served overcooked and juiceless, I marveled at one act of magic performed inside McCoy’s kitchen: It prepared a quarter rack of spare ribs, mostly oven-baked, which fell off the bone in hunks. It had barely a whiff of smoke and was served with a sticky sauce and cheddar grits. Just about all the things, in other words, that I hate about ribs. And yet...and yet I loved these ribs.

It was a case of a transformed restaurant momentarily transforming my entire belief system about barbecued ribs. I still can’t believe it.

Kitchen 2404, 2404 Wisconsin Ave. NW, (202) 333-3877

Alliance Tavern, 3238 Wisconsin Ave. NW, (202) 362-0362

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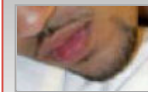


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