

## Z Grille: fine dining with an edge in downtown St. Pete

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By Brian Ries



FLAVOR B.L.A.S.T: Z-Grille's B.L.A.S.T. features three perfectly cooked scallops with bacon, lettuce, avocado and tomato.

When I call Z Grille co-owners Zach and Jennifer Gross to tell them I'm reviewing the restaurant, the first thing Zach says is: "Oh no, I didn't throw you out, did I?"

Apparently, just a few days earlier Gross had been involved in a, um, disagreement with a customer who wanted some saltines with his oysters. When the customer shoved Gross' homemade crackers back in his chest, Gross called the cops and had him escorted off the premises.

It wasn't me, by the way.

"I've been trying to do that less these days," Gross says.

That might be a good idea, but his little story strikes at the very heart of why Z Grille is such an appealing place. The restaurant turns out intensely flavorful, occasionally elegant, and always interesting food that has almost as much character as its chef. And with a recent move to the new Signature Place building, the décor matches both the dishes and the man. From the first step in to the last bite, Z Grille is fine dining with an edge.

Like the deviled eggs (\$3 for 3). These are amped-up versions of a classic Southern picnic food that's rarely reinvented in a restaurant setting. One comes laced with subtle sweet crab shreds that make the whipped yolk delicate and rich at the same time. The other has avocado mixed into the filling, with a tiny piece of smoky bacon, a drizzle of hot sauce infused with chili powder and a tiny slice of spicy jalapeno. Both are rustic, in-your-face and thoughtfully constructed. Very Gross.

Dr. Pepper fried ribs (\$11) are sticky sweet, with a great combination of slow-cooked, moist interior and profoundly caramelized -- almost candied -- crunchy bits on the outside. I find myself sucking on the ends of the bones just to get to every last bit of flavor.

Z Grille's B.L.A.S.T. (bacon, lettuce, avocado, scallop, tomato, \$14) will likely become a new favorite, if only because of the value and execution. Despite the fancy acronym, this is pretty much a straightforward scallop dish. Of course, the three scallops in question are giant, perfectly cooked and nicely seasoned -- although there's a bit of grittiness that needed to be cleaned out -- with all the other letters in the dish's names providing thoughtful, complementary notes.

The sheer volume of the shellfish on that plate, for that price, also illustrates one of the Gross' business strategies at the new Z Grille. "My food cost is like 42 percent," explains Zach, "and I'm fine with that. I'm in it for the long haul." Most restaurants, from chains to independent spots, aim for costs much lower than that to maintain profitability. Gross is relying more on getting people in and providing them value for their money to create loyalty. Call it a business model that emphasizes cash flow over profits. "I'm making money, no doubt about it. But it's not about numbers; it's about people in the seats," he adds.

Entrées are more expensive, and also contain a few rough edges that are less welcome. A too-salty chef is entertaining. A too-salty risotto can be tough to eat. That risotto was also underneath a piece of sea bass (\$28) that, although crusty and moist, seemed devoid of the buttery richness that usually makes this uber-mild fish worth eating.

The signature Z Grille rib eye (\$25) is just as good as before, with salt and a spicy seasoning blend put to good use on the gloriously crusty grilled steak. More dry spice is packed into a dollop of compound butter on top that almost -- but not quite -- pushes the beef into the realm of overwhelming richness. Even big spears of grilled asparagus and garlic mashed potatoes receive the spice shake, although with the potatoes the heat is overwhelmed by raw garlic that needs a little more heat to mellow out.

Gross also makes a "new rib eye" that's described as a filet by our waiter. He's wrong; it's actually rib eye, but cut from the end of the section with most of the fat removed. Not sure why you'd order it, however, when you have the real thing close at hand in all its fatty glory.

Z Grille's chipotle barbecue pork tenderloin (\$19) sums up Gross' aesthetic in one fell swoop. The slices of pork are mild, fork tender and cooked an ideal medium rare, but you might not even notice. On top is an assertive, homey, sweet-and-spicy barbecue sauce that's nearly as simple as a store-bought brand. Underneath is luscious creamed corn studded by bits of bright jalapeno, a concoction that's easily one of the best items on the menu. How can basic pig compete with all of that?

Gross does better with his assimilation of common fare and elegance in one of the desserts -- deep-fried sweet spring rolls (\$7). Enclosed in the crisp wrap is buttery custard broken only by occasional punches of butterscotch and chocolate. The custard? A slab of cheesecake melted by the fry. The punches? Bits of Butterfinger candy bars. It's like eating at the state fair, without the carnies.

Instead, you have hip, eager young servers cruising the floor. You have the elegant Jennifer Gross chatting up regulars at the bar, her tattooed and aproned husband darting out from the open kitchen in bursts of back-slapping energy. And you have food that references backyard picnics, midway fry carts and high-end restaurants.

That combination has formed one of St. Pete's most unique restaurants. Just try not to get worked up over the lack of saltines.

## INFO

### Z Grille

3.5 stars

104 Second St. St. Petersburg, 727-822-9600 or [zgrille.net](http://zgrille.net),  
11:30 a.m.-10 p.m., Mon.-Thurs., 11:30 a.m.-11 p.m., Fri.-Sat.