

A singular voice

[Laura Reiley](#), Times Food Critic

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ST. PETERSBURG — We have more than our share of chain restaurants. What is more, we have more than our share of restaurants that aspire to be chain restaurants. Because of that, the area is crowded with places that are pleasant and aim to please everyone with menus that are recognizable and market-tested. How could that be bad, right?

The missing ingredients are authorship, quirkiness and unique perspective. In a sea of similar, yet pleasant, restaurants, I miss being surprised, thrilled and occasionally challenged. It's the difference between a text written by committee and one that reflects a singular vision. In other words, it's the difference between craft and art.

Zach and Jennifer Gross' new Z Grille, which opened at the bottom of the new Signature Place on Nov. 5, has got personality. The edgy decor is dominated by a 10-foot bamboo halfpipe with artwork from local tattoo artist Evil Don. Skateboarding and tattoos, the calling cards of iconoclasts. But it's not in your face. It's playful and self-mocking, yet still sophisticated.

And that's the way the food is, too. Have no idea what I'm talking about? Think Dr Pepper fried ribs (\$11), deviled eggs that come revved up with crab meat or avocado and bacon (either way, it's 3 for \$3) or a bacon-lettuce-avocado seared-sea-scallop tomato composed salad (\$14) called the B.L.A.S.T.

It's all a blast, really. Chef Zach Gross' flavors are assertive but suave: A fan of chipotle barbecue pork tenderloin (\$19) gets overshadowed by its lush jalapeno goat cheese creamed corn. A half dozen cucumber hama hama oysters (\$17) are accessorized with a highbrow (and shallot-punched) mignonette along with a workingman's cocktail sauce. Gross has a passion, quite sensibly, for Nueske bacon, which appears again in a retro-goofy, but delicious, miniwedge salad (\$9). Salt is also his friend, sometimes maybe a bit too chummy — our very favorite entree, a velvety pan-seared sea bass (\$28) paired with a gorgeous veggie risotto and a sleek beurre blanc, was incredibly satisfying but left us a little parched.

Which brings us to the beverages. Signature cocktails veer from haute Nuevo Latino like the Zen Zen (\$10), made with watermelon vodka and fresh watermelon, to silly romps like a concoction called the Rock Star (\$10), which tasted uncannily like its namesake energy drink. The wine list takes itself a little more seriously, with a number of splurgy by-the-glass offerings, most from California, that pair beautifully with the menu.

It's a short dinner menu, with an even briefer lunch menu that debuted last week. Perhaps its brevity serves to accentuate its singularity and charm. Already the service staff of fairly hip young folks enthuse about the details. They'll steer you to a homey banana bread pudding (\$8) if they think you need a little comforting, or toward a Butterfinger spring roll (\$7) if you seem in the mood for a hoot.

I'd encourage Gross to add a vegetarian entree. And of the seven existing dinner entrees, two are rib eyes that feature meat that seemed inordinately knife-resistant. But in every other way, Z Grille strikes me as a boon to downtown — a newcomer that knows what it wants to be and knows how to get there.

Laura Reiley can be reached at lreiley@sptimes.com or (727) 892-2293. Her blog, the Mouth of Tampa Bay, is at www.blogs.tampabay.com/dining. Reiley dines anonymously and unannounced. The Times pays all expenses. Advertising has nothing to do with selection for review or the assessment.

review

Z Grille

104 Second St. S,
St. Petersburg

(727) 822-9600; www.zgrille.net

Cuisine: New American

Hours: 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and 5 to 10 p.m. Monday through Friday, until 11 p.m. Saturday

Details: V, MC, Amex; reservations accepted; full bar

Prices: Lunch entrees \$8-\$14; dinner entrees \$18-\$28

Rating out of four stars:

Food: ★★★ Service: ★★★ Atmosphere: ★★★

Overall: ★★★

Thursday in Weekend: Frida's Cafe and Bakery in Largo

Key: Extraordinary ★★★★★

Excellent ★★★ Good ★★ Fair ★

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