

For Z Grille, 2nd Time's A Charm



The New 2nd Street Ribeye Filet is a "main event" on the menu at Z Grille in St Petersburg.

By [ROMMIE JOHNSON](#) |
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ST. PETERSBURG - For several years a standout in a vibrant downtown scene, the old Z Grille eventually seemed to be bursting at the seams.

Not just because of the eatery's cozy confines, but also because enough creativity simmered in chef Zack Gross' kitchen for two restaurants.

Lunches were casual affairs, featuring Southwestern staples with an inventive SoCal twist. At dinner, Gross indulged more upscale ambitions, dabbling in [sophisticated fare](#) with an assertive spirit of culinary adventure.

Sound schizophrenic? At times, it was. But that problem has since been solved. The new Z Grille opened in November on the bottom floor of Signature Place. The old spot, renamed Zurritos, continues to cook spicy favorites from the Mexicali menu, while the new location finds Gross preparing inspired New [American entrees](#) in an appropriately sleek setting.

Z Grille's hip dining room is both timely and timeless, an appealing mix of a modern [urban vibe](#) with Eastern minimalist flourishes; imagine the Jetsons gone feng shui. Tables sit in a big, beautiful bamboo half-pipe adorned with artwork by local tattoo artist Evil Don. The inviting bar, which serves up a long list of creative cocktails, an [impressive variety](#) of wines and a few solid American craft brews, is made from orange skateboard wheel resin. Don't be surprised to hear "Brass Monkey" by the Beastie Boys pumping over the restaurant's sound system.

Clearly, this is elegance with an edge.

The menu matches that description, neatly balancing the fancy with the familiar. To wit, it's impossible to call a place pretentious when they marinate their ribs in Dr. Pepper and then fry 'em. But, then again, you wouldn't care either way after one bite.

Those finger-licking, fall-off-the-bone ribs were the best of the appetizers we sampled. We were mildly disappointed with the B.L.A.S.T., a dish of fresh, tender sea scallops, because the kitchen left off its applewood-smoked bacon complement. We enjoyed our warm spinach salad, dressed with red onion, goat cheese, a hint of bacon and vinaigrette. But the Mini Wedge of baby iceberg with bacon and bleu cheese arrived in a pool of water.

Other notable starters include deviled eggs (!) with crab (!!), spicy jumbo shrimp and a fresh ceviche made with sea bass or snapper.

Although the portions seemed inconsistent, most of our entrees were winners. The perfectly cooked, pan-seared sea bass, served with subtly tart citrus butter and a velvety vegetable risotto, drew raves for the way its natural flavors shone through. We were also impressed with the Classic Central Avenue Ribeye - a holdover from the old location - which was tender, flavorful and perfectly cooked to order. Our only letdown was the seared and roasted duck breast, served with wild mushroom risotto, which sadly was overcooked.

Service on our visits was friendly and professional.

Desserts are made in-house daily, so the menu varies. We tried an obscenely rich chocolate crème brulee that was a tad watery, and a chocolate cupcake - literally in a mug - that was decent, but not nearly as good, or as warm, as we remembered from a previous visit.

Z Grille is also a solid - and more affordable - bet at lunchtime, offering al fresco seating and a small menu of interesting salads and sandwiches. Despite a few small lapses in attention to detail, the new Z Grille is off to a promising start.

Z Grille

BOTTOM LINE: Creative New American cuisine in a hip setting.

WHERE: 104 Second St. S., St. Petersburg

HOURS: lunch: 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday; dinner: 5-10 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 5-11 p.m. Friday and Saturday; closed Sunday

CREDIT CARDS: All major

RESERVATIONS: Recommended

CHILDREN'S MENU: No

ALCOHOL: Full bar and wine list

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Yes

PRICE: Entrees range from \$16 to \$28

CALL: (727) 822-9600

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