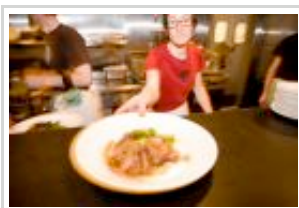


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A More Perfect Union

Lincoln unites barebones style and brilliant cuisine.

BY DEEDA SCHROEDER



FOUR SCORE AND SEVEN
DISHES: Madame Lincoln
herself, Jenn Louis, in the
kitchen.

IMAGE: cameronbrowne.com

If you've never set foot in a commercial kitchen, the difference between a catering chef and a restaurant chef might seem like splitting hairs. But, in fact, the two are like poodles and German shepherds—same species, very different animals.

Caterers enjoy spontaneity, thrive on change, and never get to create the same meal twice. Their restaurant brethren live and breathe consistency, aspiring to turn out plates all night long that look and taste exactly the same.

After 10 years as the catering colossus behind Culinary Artistry and earlier stints cooking at Wildwood, there's no question 37-year-old Portlander Jenn Louis can cook. But can she translate the caterer's think-on-your-feet sensibility into the nightly ritual of busy dinner service?

With the birth of Lincoln five months ago, Louis has shown us she can play both roles with considerable ease.

Louis displays her firm grasp of technique, seasonal flavors and barebones but brilliant style, and everyone—from servers to bartenders, and even the host at the door—cares about keeping those concepts focused and confident. And, with a few minor exceptions, they all succeed.

Louis says she believes in doing as little to the seasonal ingredients she uses as possible. But one person's simple is another's sublime: Her recipes may contain few ingredients, but her skill in transforming them transcends the ordinary.

Starters playfully combine ingredients and textures, and the results sing in harmony: the bruschetta and cured pork (\$11), cleverly topped slabs of toasted country bread with smoky-salty meat and what Louis calls "Brussels-sprout marrow"—actually a spreadably soft roasted version of the earthy vegetable's stalk. Chewy, fresh-baked thyme flatbread wedges (\$11) came with a pile of tangy-crunchy Napa cabbage, apple, and two postage stamp-sized squares of caramelized brown-sugar bacon. On another night, the bruschetta was spread with a lush layer of glistening rough country pork pâté (\$11) and finished with lightly sweet soft apples and crunchy frisée. Messy? Perhaps. But delicious for sure.

An arugula salad (\$9) with pecorino and toasted almonds benefited from its tart lemon and anchovy dressing, but made for a puckery mouthful with the lightly bitter, peppery greens. A sweet yellow carrot soup (\$7) with ginger and crème fraîche was a lovely, delicate color, but was flat with no trace of ginger flavor.

One memorable dish was the tagliatelle bolognese with pecorino (\$17)—a heap of thick, al dente housemade egg noodles and a rich meaty sauce. Louis says the secret is simmering the house-ground hanger steak with tomato paste and onions for nearly four hours, and adding lots of housemade chicken stock as the liquids reduce and thicken. Pair the end product with a glass of full, round cabernet franc and this will be one bowl of pasta you won't want to share.

Hanger steak with blue-cheese butter (\$23) was cooked to order and tender but encased in an unappetizing layer of char. And the side of cornmeal-crust onion rings was crisp and tasty, but could have been made with finer-ground cornmeal. A single grilled pork loin chop (\$18) was tender, juicy and flavorful with pancetta tesa, Brussels sprouts and apples, but could have been served in a more generous portion.

Desserts don't live up to the integrity and strength of the rest of the menu. Lincoln's chocolate pudding (\$7) had a peculiar, gummy texture. Its dollop of tangy crème fraîche better suited the gingerbread cake (\$7), which was embellished instead with a tiny scoop of pumpkin ice cream. You might be better off to heed the siren's call from Pix, right across North Williams Avenue.

Guests entering the restaurant can choose to dine at the bar or in front of the open, intimate kitchen. With wooden trusses soaring above the austere space—part of a renovated warehouse—the restaurant manages to feel both comfortable and spare, though with few private spots.

The waitstaff is headed by Louis' husband, David Welch, who also directs the Oregon and Mediterranean-heavy wine program. Graceful and knowledgeable, servers help diners navigate the menu, keep the pacing smooth, and know when it's OK to be chatty. Not that there's much time for conversation when they're busy—and, as word gets out about Lincoln's confident cuisine, busy should be the norm.

EAT: *Lincoln, 3808 N Williams Ave., 288-6200, lincolnpdx.com. Dinner 5:30-9 pm Tuesday-Thursday; 5:30-10 pm Friday-Saturday. \$\$ Moderate.*

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