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Zea's chicken and rib specialties

photo by Chris Johnson

Experience What Comes Off This Woodfire Grill

By Lee Ratliff

WHEN YOU LEARN of a restaurant founded by three chefs in New Orleans and recently imported to Texas, you'll be forgiven for having certain preconceptions. You might expect it to serve gumbo and étouffée, exhibit a rustic old-world ambience and play up to the more clichéd tourist imagery of New Orleans. Well, if you go to Zea Woodfire Grill with these expectations you'll be sorely disappointed. No, that's not right. You might be surprised, but you certainly won't be disappointed.

While the menu at Zea Woodfire Grill obviously has southern roots, it defies expectation by incorporating Asian, Mediterranean and European flavors. The restaurant is upscale and fashionable. It's more French Riviera than French Quarter. The warm, contemporary atmosphere particularly impressed me. Throughout the restaurant, the décor is consistent, modern and informal without being too casual. Simple design emphasizes the

materials – wood, glass, cloth and stone. Warm colors and natural elements help eliminate the cold, hard edge common in many modern interiors.

Arriving for dinner on a busy Saturday night, we waited in the lounge for the rest of our party to arrive. We took a seat on a comfortable sofa while a friendly and knowledgeable waiter took our drink orders. While Zea features a full bar and some in our party seemed to enjoy their cocktails, I couldn't resist their fresh-squeezed lemonade (\$3, with one free refill) which turned out to be delicious, though just a bit too sweet for my taste. A three-piece jazz combo played at one end of the lounge and added considerably to the hip and relaxing atmosphere, but it was too loud for easy conversation. Despite that, I was actually disappointed when our table was called. I was enjoying the interlude in the lounge as much as the anticipation of the meal.

We ordered an appetizer before diving

too deeply into the menu. The descriptions of the Chicken Quesadillas, Mediterranean Hummus and Asian Almond Shrimp looked tempting, but we were inexplicably drawn to the Duck Empanadas (\$6.75). These deep fried pastries were stuffed with roasted duck, peppers, onion and cheese. Duck is often a polarizing, love-it-or-hate-it flavor because of its distinctive character, but this was a duck dish that anyone could love. The flavor was great and the pastry was flaky and crunchy - a necessary counterpart to the filling, which lacked texture.

Zea specializes in grilled and rotisserie meat and poultry and it is obvious with a single glance at the list of entrées. "A carnivore's delight!" one of my dining companions happily exclaimed as he proceeded to order the BBQ Chicken and Rib Platter (\$16.50). I, too, gave in to this combination's seductive charms – a half rack of ribs, a half chicken, and your choice of a side dish. Both the ribs and

chicken can be ordered in any of several different preparations. I ordered my ribs Thai-style, with a sweet and spicy glaze. Not one to shrink from too much of a good thing, I ordered my chicken sweet and spicy as well. The Thai ribs had a nice sticky, sweet glaze with just a hint of heat. They were sprinkled with sesame seeds and chopped green onion. The texture was firm – not tough, but not fall-off-the-bone mushy either. The flavor was excellent, a nice departure from typical American-style ribs. The chicken was also very good, but not as distinctive as the ribs. The sweet and spicy chili glaze gave the skin a nice flavor and the meat was tasty, moist and perfectly done, but the flavor wasn't quite as complex as the ribs. Still, it was very good.

The Almond Shrimp Salad (\$13.00) had a great presentation, a zesty flavor with a little spiciness, and a good crunchy texture provided by the crispy noodles and slivered almonds. The shrimp were tasty and perfectly cooked. The Asian Tuna Salad (\$15.00) was also nicely presented, consisting of romaine lettuce topped with seared tuna and piled high with crunchy fried Asian noodles. It was dressed with a peanut vinaigrette and sprinkled with sesame seeds and toasted almonds. Both salads had a bit too much of the crispy noodles, the excess apparently intended for presentation appeal more than consumption.

Each of the entrees (excluding salads and sandwiches) comes with a choice of sides. The baked sweet potato was nice with an unexpected flavor of cinnamon. The Thai Green Beans were nicely cooked, still retaining a bit of crunch. They were topped with Zea's Thai glaze and sprinkled with sesame seeds. The Buttered Sweet Potatoes were mashed and had a fruity flavor we couldn't identify. Other available sides include Roasted Corn Grits, Red Beans and Rice and Hand-Cut Fries.

Our table opted to share all three of

the desserts (\$5 each) available on Zea's menu. The Old Fashioned Chocolate Cake was good, but not distinguished from chocolate cakes available anywhere else. A



Zea's Sweet Potato Bread Pudding

photo by Chris Johnson

The Thai ribs had a nice sticky, sweet glaze with just a hint of heat. They were sprinkled with sesame seeds and chopped green onion.

much better bet is the Sweet Potato Bread Pudding. It's a tall slice of bread pudding topped with a praline sauce and a flavor that resembles a spice cake. The Zea Fruit Crackle was also well received. It's a blend of seasonal fruit (berries, during our visit) baked with a sweet and crunchy crackle topping and served warm with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

On a return visit we tried the lunch menu. Our waiter assured us that we could not go wrong with the Red Beans and Rice Platter (\$9), so I went with his suggestion. Departing slightly from tradition, the plate

features red beans, brown rice, andouille sausage, and two pieces of fried chicken. The dish was outstanding - very flavorful beans and rice with a spicy and smoky – but small – andouille sausage. Two large pieces of crispy fried chicken gave added substance and wonderful flavor. My companion ordered the Rotisserie Sirloin Carver Sandwich (\$9), a good, but not particularly memorable sandwich with a very generous portion of sliced rotisserie sirloin.

During our two visits I was struck by the quality and consistency of service. Everybody we encountered was helpful, friendly, and knowledgeable. The table service was well paced, but not rushed. The wait staff was attentive, but not pushy. Even the busy manager had an eye open for needed service, filling my tea glass once when it was low. A nice touch:

the staff has no uniform, but all are easily identifiable by their vertical stripe shirts which were unique and fashionable.

An attractive feature of Zea Woodfire Grill for the coming autumn season is the spacious covered patio area with a large stone fireplace. Comfortable cushioned teak furniture is casually arranged around the fireplace and it seems like the perfect place to visit with good friends over drinks served from the adjoining lounge area. Zea's also has a large private dining area for large parties. It is equipped with media and communications equipment for corporate meetings and dinners.

Overall, the Zea Woodfire Grill seems sure to please. The food, service, and atmosphere are exceptional. Though not cheap, the menu is affordable and a good value, especially considering the quality of food and service. The Zia Woodfire Grill is located next to Blue Mesa, in The Shops at Granite Park, at the southeast corner of S.H. 121 and the North Dallas Tollway.

Lee Ratliff is our expert "foodie" and owner of Ambrosia Creamery.

Beer Can Chicken

(adapted from *How to Grill*,
by Steven Raichlen)

BEER CAN CHICKEN is practically fool-proof and makes the juiciest, tastiest chicken you can imagine.

Configure your grill for indirect cooking at a "medium" temperature, 350 degrees and let it pre-heat while you prepare the chicken.

Rinse & clean a 3.5 to 4 pound chicken. Pat dry the chicken.

Apply your favorite dry rub to the outside of the chicken. Use as much as you can get to stick to the skin. Also sprinkle the rub in the cavity.

Use your finger to loosen and separate the skin from the breast. Do not remove. Pour additional dry rub under the skin and spread across the breast with your finger. Flip the chicken over and repeat on the thighs. (optional)

Pour out half of any beer, soda or fruit juice that comes in a 12 ounce can, and add a couple of teaspoons of the dry rub.

At the grill, insert the open end of the beer can in the chicken's cavity.

Keeping the bird vertical, place it on the grill so the can is directly on the grate and use the legs like a tripod.

Cook, without lifting the lid, for about an hour and fifteen minutes before checking the temperature. An instant-read thermometer in the thigh should read about 180 degrees when done. Depending on grill temperature, the chicken may require 15-20 more minutes.

Use a rub that doesn't contain too much salt or it will overpower the chicken.

Wild Willy's Number One-derful Rub

(taken from *Smoke & Spice*,
by Cheryl and Bill Jamison)

3/4 cup paprika

1/4 cup fresh ground black pepper

1/4 cup coarse salt, kosher or sea salt

1/4 cup sugar

2 tablespoons chili powder

2 tablespoons garlic powder

2 tablespoons onion powder

2 teaspoons cayenne

Mix the spices thoroughly in a bowl. Store covered in a cool dark pantry.



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