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the Stranger

Seattle's Only Chow Section • Mar 31 - Apr 6, 2005

It's Elemental

Small, Simple, and Surprising

BY SARA DICKERMAN

Elemental

(Wallingford)

3309 Wallingford Ave N,
849-2542

Tue-Sat cocktails 5-6 pm, dinner 6
pm-12 am, closed Sun-Mon.

Before I say anything else about Elemental, let me just get this off my chest: braised shortribs on a garlic waffle. Because, brothers and sisters, braised shortribs on a garlic waffle is

a very good thing. Think about it: a soft golden waffle, with the round fragrance of roasted garlic, peeking its little squares out from under a juicy pile of long-stewed meat. It's perfectly comforting food, but not boring and somehow it avoids being that knowing "pop" food from the early '90s (you know, ever fancier mac 'n' cheeses, homemade Pop Tarts, etc.). Andrew was the one who ordered it, and he looked kind of stunned by his good luck. "It's even off the bone," he said, "I don't have to do any work!" Later on in the car, we agreed that we might have liked one more, zingy, element. "I think it needed something white," he said. "Like horseradish," I specified. But this is to quibble, because the short ribs and waffle sent me in a way no other dish has in a long time.

We got said waffle at Elemental, a funny little restaurant (and I mean *little*: five small tables and a couple of bar-side perches) in a



ELEMENTAL The good sense to serve short ribs, waffles, and offbeat wines.

Jimmy Clarke

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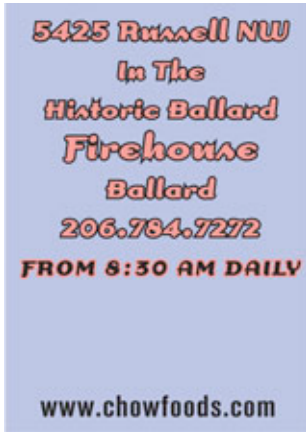


AT the *Hi-Life*

Norm's
 Eatery & Ale House

TRIVIA NIGHT
EVERY THURSDAY
AT 8:30

Practice Question:
 What is Norm's famous
 for on the weekends?



funny little location (in a condo-plex on a Wallingford cul-

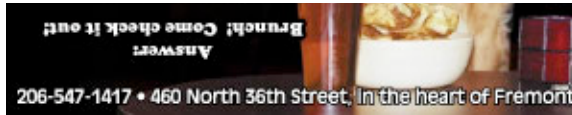
de-sac). I am already inclined to love small restaurants because (1) they lack hubris (2) the emotion behind them is so palpable and (3) the kitchen can't really ever get in the weeds if there are only 12 diners.

When we arrived on a Friday evening, the tables were full, and we had to wait a stretch in a couple of armchairs near the entrance. Andrew and I sat sipping cucumber-infused water from tiny water glasses as we analyzed the spare, prefab-chic look of the restaurant (bare light bulbs, pressboard flooring, and Ikea-esque furnishings).

The décor might be simple, but the service is kind of baroque, in the form of Phred Westfall, a co-owner (with chef Laurie Reideman) who gleefully poured us tastes of wine all night. "This chili cheesecake is screaming out for a white, but just for fun here's some red to try too." (I should note that the savory cheesecake (\$8) was yummy too, scratching the nacho nerve while maintaining dignity in its form.) Westfall's got his own way of doing things: He wouldn't tell us which wines he was pouring with each course, and instead urged us to sink in and experience the wine with the food. Later I could pump him for information, but he delivered it offhandedly, as if it were a little beside the point.

The wine service was showier than the food, which is impressive in its clean presentation, modest portions, and focus--each dish was really an étude in one or two flavors. There was a nice artichoke dip, long on yummy 'choke and short on filler (\$8); tuna tartare mixed up with a little curry powder (\$11); gnocchi served with butter and truffle crumbs and not quite enough salt (\$11), and a cheese plate with a penchant for buttery cheeses (\$11).

Despite my general preference for being in control at a restaurant table, it was one of the best wine evenings I've had, sniffing and slurping offbeat wines and finding that a Riesling spätlese really does have a cosmic connection with Dungeness crab cakes (\$16). Westfall is a benevolent dictator in his dining room, displaying, as the best hosts do, a nutty degree of generosity. At one point, I counted nine glasses on our table (some of which had been refilled numerous times). When we got the bill, we realized he'd only charged us \$14 each for our wine tastings. (Our meal was also reasonable: If you order three courses for \$30, you overwrite the menu



rainastar

i have a sharp tongue that needs a warm place to hide when it gets...



prices.) In a similar flight of fancy, the menu and the ensuing bill insisted that tipping was unnecessary. As a creature of habit, I found myself throwing some cash on the table as we left.

Elemental reminded me in the best way of Portland, where restaurants seem to open with ease, small and sometimes roughly sketched, so much more alive than their corporate or semi-corporate counterparts. Not enough restaurants here are willing to be so idiosyncratic. And far too few of them have the profoundly good sense to serve short ribs and waffles.

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