

ea
Watermelon
gazpacho

REVIEW
Ema
74 W. Illinois St.
312-527-5586
★★★★☆
Take it or leave it



Must *love* Mediterranean

CHEF C.J. JACOBSON BRINGS EMA TO LIFE



was juicy but woefully in need of salt.

Top tentacle and luscious lamb

Grilled octopus (\$14.95), which was flanked by fried sheets of kale and rippling crispy-skinned fingerling potatoes dripping with a velvety lemon vinaigrette, was as addictive as a perfect batch of French fries. I shot my dining companion a dirty look when I realized she'd eaten more than her fair share of the tender tentacles and there were none left. Though more of a cold-weather dish, I couldn't resist ordering the braised lamb shoulder (\$24.95) topped with Super Ball-sized cherries and caramel-like dates. A saucer of lettuce vinaigrette—pureed butter lettuce, tarragon, basil, parsley and preserved lemon—lightened the load.

Out for service

As much as I enjoyed Jacobson's food, our meal was interrupted twice by food runners trying to drop off plates meant for other tables. The service staff also tried to remove plates I was still working on several times throughout the meal.

I did appreciate that when I couldn't decide between two wines, our server brought out samples of each for me to try. I settled on the 2014 Domaine Spiropoulos Mantinia Moschofilero (\$11) with notes of honey, grapefruit and mineral flavor. What I didn't appreciate was that our server assumed my friend wanted the same wine and brought out a second unbidden glass.

All hail halva

Dessert from pastry chef Yasmin Gutierrez was a mixed bag. I never thought I'd write this, but it seems halva is having a moment. You may remember that I was gaga over the version served at Honey's a few weeks ago. Gutierrez's take (\$9.95) offers two plays on the dessert: one made with chia seeds and another infused with chocolate and chili that's served with candied pistachios. Both were silkier and superior to what I had at Honey's. Deconstructed baklava (\$6.95) looked like regular baklava that had been smashed with a sledgehammer. Filo shards mixed with pistachio nut stuffing and dried fruit were dry. I yearned for a jar of honey to make the whole thing more edible.

Bottom line

You rarely see Jacobson's name without mention of his appearance on "Top Chef." It's a bit of a disservice because he's way more than a TV chef. He's a top talent with a fine palate. However—and this is surprising as they rarely falter—the Lettuce crew is not proving an equal partner in service at Ema. If they up their game, this restaurant could eventually become a classic.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED, AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

From the street, you might gaze longingly into Ema, a new River North spot from chef **C.J. Jacobson** (Intro) and Lettuce Entertain You, and see an oasis. Sheer curtains flutter in the breeze, wicker pendant light fixtures sway and glasses of rosé drip with condensation. White string lights hanging across an indoor trellis cast a gauzy light against green vines.

But look a little closer and you'll notice a sheen of sweat across many diners' brows. Servers huddle in the far back near air conditioning vents. The open front windows at Ema seem like a great idea, but the evening I visited, temperatures hovered near 90 degrees and the AC couldn't keep up. I mopped my forehead and filched glugs of my cocktail, wondering if I'd gotten myself into a hot mess.

Hot khaki nights

If you're fond of khakis and white shirts, you might want to rethink your wardrobe before you visit as there's a good chance you'll disappear into the sand- and linen-colored decor or be mistaken for a similarly clad server. Save for some inlays of worn reclaimed wood, the dining room channels every upscale beach resort you've ever seen with its maple woods, sharp Scandinavian-skewing seats and whitewashed brick walls. Though Ema has only been open for a few weeks, the clientele—a mix of Jackie Onassis-like, sunglasses-wearing old ladies; stylish moms with babies in tow; and youthful happy hour-seeking office dwellers—seem like regulars. The night I visited, Jacobson chatted up a few guests like old friends, and I overheard a server tell the table

behind me that he recognized them from last week.

California dreamin' with a little Israeli imagination

The beachy decor is complemented by Jacobson's California- and Mediterranean-inspired bites and mezze, a.k.a. Mediterranean tapas.

"I like the idea of mezze, small plates that can all work together in some way," Jacobson said. "I've always liked the Mediterranean palate, but I was first introduced to it when I was playing volleyball in Israel. Its simplicity resonated with me."

It resonated with me too. Though I was overheating, a swoosh of jalapeno and lime-brightened avocado and sweet pea puree (\$8.95) bursting with mint cooled me down. Housemade labneh (\$7.95), or Lebanese yogurt, was topped with salty Marcona almonds, juicy burnt honey and juicy roasted grapes. The house pita bread was so warm and comforting that I

wanted to hold it to my cheek and take a nap.

But, and this is my first service issue, there were only six small slices of the pita for our table of four. We polished them off in seconds and asked for more. The refilled basket didn't arrive for minutes, and we were left waiting to sop up more of the puree and labneh.

Waiter, there's watermelon in my soup!

While we waited, a bowl of watermelon gazpacho (\$7.95) the color of a cherry slushie arrived. The broth—a puree of watermelon, piquillo pepper, radish and house-fermented Fresno chili—was bracing but finished with a lip-tingling fire. Pickled bits of crunchy watermelon rind and tiny mint leaves floating in the broth tamed the spice. I've had

watermelon soup before, but it's usually tasted like a single melon note. Jacobson's version is complex, featuring the savoriness of a bloody mary and the frozen fruity rewards of a treat from Mario's Italian Lemonade.

Eh on the eggplant

Our server pushed the fried eggplant (\$8.95) like a used car salesman encouraging an extended warranty plan. The first few bites were OK, but eventually the plate became an exercise in monotony. Some of the bigger hunks of eggplant were soggy, raw in the middle and tough to chew. The best bits were the thinly sliced ones, especially when dunked in the side of chickpea miso dip. Like a couple of other tables serviced by our waiter, we left half the plate untouched. A lamb and beef kebab (\$13.95) glistened with olive oil and had a fine smoky char. The meat

RATINGS KEY

- **** DEAD UPON ARRIVAL
- **** PROCEED WITH CAUTION
- **** GIVE IT SOME TIME
- **** TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT
- **** OFF TO A GOOD START
- **** HEATING UP
- **** ALREADY HOT

