**Ruth Reichl's review of Michel Richard's original L.A. restaurant Citrus**

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"What's the name of that hot new restaurant on Melrose?" somebody asked me the other day.

"Citrus," I said, without missing a beat. The restaurant is as hot as a firecracker, with people pushing eagerly through the door and tapping their toes while they wait for the ever-turning tables.

"That's it," he said. And then I stopped to wonder what makes one restaurant hot while others sit empty, waiting for customers who never come.

The success of Citrus was probably predictable. And yet everybody who opens a restaurant is sure that his will be the one that succeeds; the truth is, most don't. What is it about this particular restaurant that makes it, at barely two months old, so busy that when you call on a Wednesday for a Saturday reservation, there are already 10 people on the waiting list?

That chef/owner Michel Richard was already L.A.'s most famous French pastry chef was probably a plus. On the down side, however, is the undeniable fact that many people wondered whether he had what it takes to run a restaurant.

Then there's the location factor. Richard chose to open his restaurant on Melrose--but a couple of blocks east of restaurant row. Right now, there is still so little happening on the "wrong side" of La Brea that in spite of proximity to the Hancock Park area, easy access from the Hollywood Freeway and a mere 20-minute drive from downtown, you could almost consider this daring.

Architecture must also be considered in the equation. Richard chose Bernard Zimmerman, a man not known for restaurant design. It was a smooth move: This is one of the most attractive restaurants in town, with a look that is totally its own. Inside, you are in a clean white room with open beams and a faintly nautical look emphasized by huge windows looking out to the patio. The patio is sheltered from the street by one wall of glass and opened to the kitchen by another. Sitting outside you look into a light, bright, airy kitchen with a huge bouquet of flowers sitting jauntily on a granite counter.

The designers have taken their color cues from the name, so there are cool yellow linens wherever you look. The result is that despite the frenzy and the crowding (there are really too many tables in the room), the restaurant almost manages to assume an air of calm.

Price is another consideration; these days it is a primary one. Richard was wise enough not to make this a wildly expensive restaurant. Portions are large, service is smooth and the most expensive entree on the menu is $18.50.

We come then, to the one thing that was not easy to predict: the food. And this is the big surprise, for Richard does not cook like a pastry chef. His dishes are bold, original and not remotely fussy; the only hint of his pastry past is the amount of attention paid to the look of each dish.

This is remarkably pretty food. Consider the soups on the current menu: One is red and one is green. Bright red and bright green. The former is a cold tomato soup, rather like a sedate gazpacho. The other is an astonishingly pungent green onion soup, made with a strong broth, lots of green onions and not a drop of cream.

The appetizers are also easy on the eye. What Richard calls crab coleslaw arrives wrapped in a bright green leaf sitting on a bright pink sauce (a sort of thinned out tomato mayonnaise). Scattered merrily across the top is a confetti made of bits of yellow squash and red peppers. It looks like a party on a plate.

Scallops come covered with curls of Maui onion rings; baby lettuce leaves are topped with generous rounds of crisply fried sweetbreads in a pungent vinaigrette made of aceto balsamico . One of Richard's newer dishes is a sort of soft oyster custard in a spinach sauce, surrounded by gently poached oysters. I loved this dish. Even more exotic and every bit as delicious is a "lasagna" made of escargots and fried parsley. This turns out to be another visual treat; the plate is painted with a swath of black squid ink on which is set an artful rectangle topped with a spring green sauce. The description is more shocking than the flavor, which is surprisingly delicate.

The restaurant may be brand new, but already the menu is changing; Richard seems to be having a lot of fun in his kitchen. I delighted in the first duck that he served; rare slices of the breast came in a shocking pink beet sauce with a great frizz of deep-fried beets on the side. Tasting these deep red crisps you instantly wondered why you'd never had them before--or even thought of them. They were dreamy to look at and even better to eat.

But now there's a different duck on the menu. This time it is a tournados served with three kinds of onions. Two thick slabs of rare duck breast come with fried onions, caramelized onions and onion sauce. There is also a well-cooked leg of duck on the plate, which acts as a fine counterpoint. Another night there was a squab, served very rare, on a bed of braised endive. The slight bitterness of the vegetable was moderated by the sweet, almost gamy taste of the bird.

Richard also has an interesting way with lamb. He serves it on a bed of saffron ravioli filled with goat cheese, laid out on a leaf of Savoy cabbage. One night bright green fava beans were sprinkled across the top. Steak in Cabernet sauce, served with some of the fine frizzy fried potatoes, was also good. I have to admit I have been less enthralled with the fish dishes, which the kitchen has a tendency to overcook. The one fish I did like was a tuna served with bean sprouts in a ginger-sesame sauce.

Strangely, my least favorite course at Citrus has been dessert. Richard should either pay more attention to the pastries or bring them over from his shop on Robertson Boulevard. Last week, there was a good creme brulee, a very good raspberry chocolate concoction and a respectable apple pie that seemed almost American. On the whole, though, the pastries are neither as inventive nor as accomplished as the entrees.

But much as I like the food here, I don't think it is what makes the restaurant hot. Any more than I think that the service (which is good), or the location, are filling the restaurant's seats. This restaurant has something else--something harder to define. Citrus has captured the mood of Los Angeles right now, and it has thereby captured the city's imagination.