

Reality TV Victor Opens Perilla; Sandro Tries Again: Food Buzz

By Ryan Sutton

May 15 (Bloomberg) -- Can a reality-show champion bring New York its next great restaurant? Or will the ex-contestant get voted off the island of Manhattan?

Harold Dieterle is likely asking himself these same questions. He just opened Perilla, an ambitious venue that combines American cuisine with Asian sensibilities.

The 29-year-old cook rose to fame by winning the first season of "Top Chef" on the Bravo channel. (It's a gastronomic "American Idol.") The grand prize? A miserly \$100,000 to kick-start a new restaurant. That's about enough to cover a chef's student loans.

Perilla is a dimly lit, 75-seat space with orange booths, white walls and a brown-wood bar. It bears no trace of a TV show or celebrity chef. Dieterle wasn't at the star-studded James Beard Foundation Awards last week, and I didn't see him strutting through his dining room, signing cookbooks.

He was in the kitchen, cooking.

Prime-time reservations are already hard to come by. Maybe Dieterle will break the curse of the reality-TV cooking show.

Remember "The Next Food Network Star"? It didn't produce any stars. Gordon Ramsay's "Hell's Kitchen" hasn't given us Michelin-worthy chefs. Most famously, NBC's "The Restaurant" helped squash the talented Rocco DiSpirito.

Perilla's cuisine, as it turns out, evokes the bright, Asian-spiked fare DiSpirito served at the now-closed Union Pacific.

DiSpirito was one of few chefs to serve scallops on the half shell. He paired the Taylor Bay variety with uni (sea urchin) and tomato water. At Perilla, diners get the same mollusk in its shell, but with a tart ramp vinaigrette.

Marbled Fish

Tomato water instead appears as an antidote to Dieterle's raw hamachi (yellowtail), so obscenely marbled it could be Kobe beef in disguise.

Skate with brown butter and capers is a bistro classic. DiSpirito took out the capers, put in lime pickle. Perilla takes things further with pickled watermelon and hibiscus broth -- a crimson pool for the skate's white flesh.

Other creations are strictly Dieterle. Roast chicken breast was as fat as a strip steak, with a crust of salty, crunchy skin and a side of Chinese sausage. Creamy langoustines were coated in a fiery coconut-peppercorn sauce.

Desserts were small -- and cheap at \$8 apiece. It's an excuse to order more than one, like lemon-fennel doughnut holes, barley custard or sticky coconut cake.

The latter came with a pastel-green frozen yogurt, spicy and grassy. What was it? It's shiso, also known as perilla, the herb for which the restaurant is named.

Our dinner for two, which included two drinks each, three appetizers, two entrees, three desserts and a 10 percent opening-week discount, cost \$134.

Perilla is at 9 Jones St., between Bleecker and West Fourth streets.
Information: +1-212-929-6868.