

Among Friends

THIS NEW CONCEPT RESTAURANT FROM LES AMIS GETS FULL MARKS, SAYS JOANNA HUGHES, EVEN THOUGH SHE STILL ISN'T SURE HOW TO DEFINE IT



I heard about FiftyThree from my hairdresser; actually a friend who'd been in for a trim earlier in the day sent me a text "Ask Casey about FiftyThree". So I did. "What is it like?" I asked between snips. "I don't know how to explain it," he said, with that rather disconcerting way hairstylists have of looking at you in the mirror while they talk, which forces you to look into the mirror... Anyway, he had gone with some friends – the first patrons of the newest restaurants with a chance of being hip are always the stylists – and thought the food amazing. "But what was it LIKE?" I persisted. "Is it European, fusion, what?" "You just have to try it for yourself," he conceded. And so I did.

I think there is a shorter wait for heaven, or at least, the better neighbourhoods in purgatory. Even if you know someone in the Les Amis group, you and he will have to take a number. The reservation rules are draconian: reservations are accepted up to two calendar months in advance; they can only accommodate up to a party of six; for a party of four or more, they need two working days' notice; for a party of less than four, 24 hours.

There are just five tables on the top floor, two on the bottom. Lovely tables they are, all Scandinavian woods in organically modern curves, but still just seven. (There is a private dining room that can seat 14.) The converted shophouse on Armenian Street (it was once the home of the National Museum gift shop) is about 2,200 sq ft in all; the space isn't crowded as it is well-thought out, but the downstairs kitchen is the focus.

Which is as it should be, because Michael Han and his team are doing something wonderful in there. I had one of the best meals of my life – or at any rate, one of the most intriguing – but I still can't wriggle what I ate into any category. I want to say

it's organic – not in the grown-without pesticides kind of way, but in the one-thing-grows-from-another-in-a-natural-progression way. And in its staging, the food definitely has a truly organic feel.

When you sit down, you are presented with a perfect potato chip – one long translucent chip dusted with a vinegar salt – vertically positioned in a polished charcoal thingy that can only be a potato chip holder. A small entrée of potatoes steamed in broth is arranged on a thick, flat piece of grey basalt; sprinkled with roasted coffee powder and a crumble of carbonised bread and topped with a sprinkling of duckweed, it looks as if it grew there. All kinds of lateral connections are made in any one dish: lightly grilled figs are buoyed up on a tapenade of black olives and matched with a Szechuan black pepper ice cream.

There are lovely touches all around; perfect bread rolls (in the shape of popovers) are kept warm in a burlap bag filled with hot nuts; a Sicilian-style paste of chillis pounded into pork lard pairs beautifully with sweet lobster, roasted duck tongues and apple; the butter comes from Wales, where a woman keeps a small herd of boutique cows (she also supplies butter to The Fat Duck in Berkshire). Desserts are paired with artisanal Chinese teas and there is a wide selection of wines by the glass so that you can precisely accent each dish.

The menu itself is small enough that you can remember it without having to ask the server twice. Nothing is cooked over an open flame; the lamb I had for my main course had been slow cooked for over 10 hours in hay, yet remained firm and flavourful. There is a wonderful profusion of vegetables cut micron-thin and barely parboiled. Chef Michael says he tries to buy local produce, even going to Geylang Serai to buy herbs gathered in the jungle, but



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many things have to come from elsewhere and he is often frustrated by the inability to find what he wants.

Above all, the food is interesting, the portions small enough so that the palate does not become tired of the novelty. I suspect that Michael and his international team – many of them, like Michael, from restaurants like The Fat Duck – are having a wonderful time experimenting, – no, not experimenting – playing, with food in their kitchen. In part, this is due to the special partnering between Les Amis Group and Han's family, which gives him ownership and free creative rein. The result is food that is no longer content to be a background for conversation, but the main event. ■

FIFTYTHREE

Address: 53 Armenian Street

www.fiftythree.com.sg

Reservations: +65 6334-5535

Lunch: Tuesday to Saturday, noon - 2pm

Dinner: Monday to Saturday, 7 - 9.30pm

Lunch is S\$45; dinner is a choice between S\$145 and S\$190

