

First Look at Rise No. 2 in Houston

BY PHAEDRA COOK

Rise No. 2, the second location of a concept that started in Dallas, simply has to be sought out, in both the literal and the figurative sense. Since it is located on the second, airy floor of BLVD Place, 1700 Post Oak in the Galleria area, someone isn't likely to stroll past on accident. There are many good reasons, though, to choose Rise No. 2 as a destination. Hidden behind a deep-green carved door that looks as if it could be an entrance to Narnia are culinary delights and many little treasures.

The specialty of the house is soufflés — airy wonders in flavors both savory and sweet, served in crocks that are generous but not overwhelming. For those who care, the menu points out that the calorie count of the soufflés is surprisingly low and ranges from 122 to 540 each, depending on the flavor.

These seem richer and more luxurious than that. The cheesy aroma of the jambon (ham) and Gruyère is dreamy and it has the flavor to match. The ham, cut into delicate bits, rest near the bottom of the bowl. The bottom is steaming hot, so some patience is needed before going after the meaty part.

Hardcore fromage lovers will also want to summon the cheese cart. It's laden with about seven



Rise No. 2 is located on the second floor of BLVD Place in the Galleria. Expect these chairs to be filled in the coming weeks.



The cheese cart at Rise No. 2 in Houston. Everything on the cart, from the hard cheese shaver at the top to the frog place card holders at the bottom, is for sale.



were from France, served beautifully, from the signature marshmallow soup at the beginning to the chocolate soufflé at the end. The marshmallow soup, by the way, isn't the Willy Wonka creation it sounds like. It's a savory carrot and tomato bisque, with three mini goat-cheese soufflés standing in as marshmallows. It's a must-order item, and diners will likely find themselves craving it when the weather gets cooler.

Yet all this glory is only part of the charm of Rise No. 2. The entire place is laden with unique, hand-crafted items. There is no service piece or utensil that isn't whimsical, innovative or extraordinarily useful. Woven fabric towels in vibrant colors are used as napkins. Green metal frogs hold two tiny glass bowls, one for salt and the other for coarse pepper. Wine ca-

At Rise, when a chocolate soufflé is served, a small well is made in the top and chocolate is drizzled into it.

different varieties, ranging from a hunky French blue to a mild, creamy Humboldt Fog with its distinctive dividing layer of ash.

On the sweet side of the soufflé menu is the puffy-topped chocolate version. Once the surface has been breached, releasing a puff of steam, a moderately rich, pudding-like interior is revealed. It's unexpectedly creamy. "We're very careful to not overcook these," said an employee. While that's important, the one we had wouldn't have suffered from another minute in the oven.

As with any good restaurant, wine is an important component, and Rise No. 2 has an excellent, reasonably priced program that has one foot in France and the other in California. So of course there is a Bordeaux-versus-California tasting flight, a reference to the

famous Judgment of Paris in 1976, where California wines unexpectedly beat French ones.

That said, French won the evening at Rise No. 2. A flight of four sparkling wines, three of which



A bartender at Rise No. 2 in Houston pours a flight of four sparkling wines.

rafes and thick plates, which have a slight unevenness that gives away their handcrafted nature, are made of recycled glass. The eclectic collection of forks, knives and spoons are antique silver. Bread service is a small baguette and a pot of butter served on a “guillotine board” fitted with a serrated knife for carving off slices.

Everywhere a diner looks, there is something beautiful and interesting to see — and it’s all for sale — even the tables and chairs, according to the bartender. Thankfully, there are no price tags in the dining area and no server is going to come make a sales pitch. It’s more a matter of if the diner wants it, he or she can ask about it. (That frog-accented salt and pepper pig very nearly found a new home.)

Near the front door, shelves laden with goods make it more obvious that Rise has a merchandising aspect to it. Among the items were antique absinthe spoons

(rare, silver-plated pieces that do not come cheaply), more stacks of the woven towels and dozens of other charming goods.

“Our owner’s big focus is on thoughtfulness,” said the bartender. “Everything here is intended to be helpful and to make people comfortable.”

Guests will encounter one last bit of thoughtfulness upon leaving when they receive a tiny little note card from the hostess. Each is printed with a musing of some type. Ours was an Albert Einstein quote: “Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow.”

Rise No. 2 does not accept reservations, so it’s first come, first served. As word gets around about this charmer, there will likely be a wait during peak hours. There’s a row of wicker chairs lined up outside the door for those who have to wait — which is, of course, very thoughtful.