

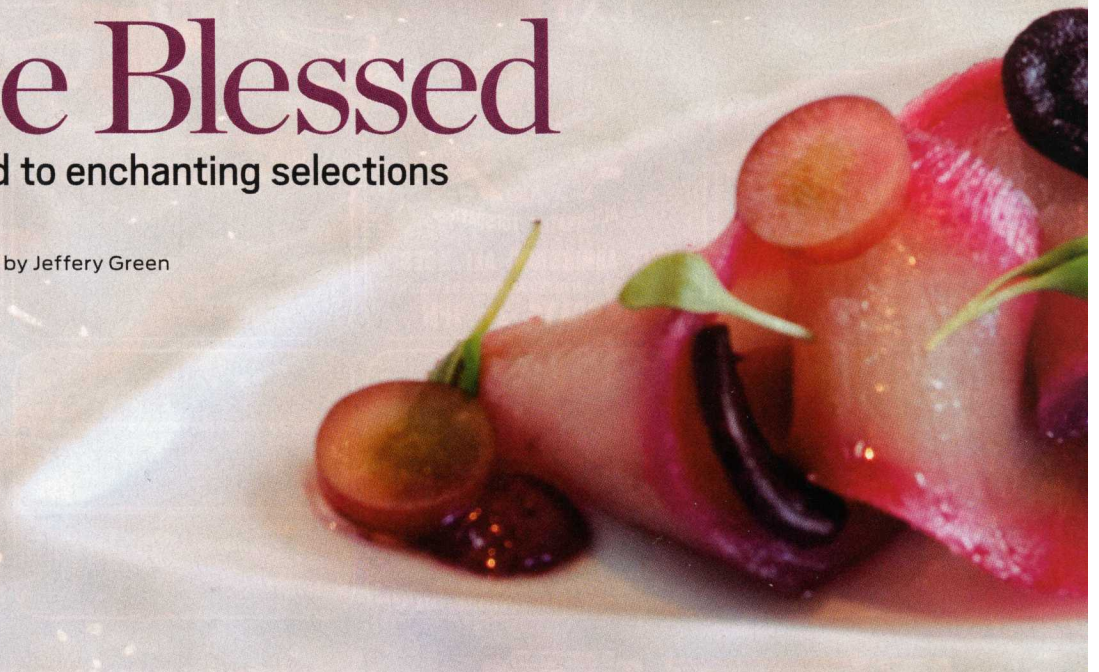
Crudo: Roots, Shoots and Fruits



Thrice Blessed

Tasting menus add to enchanting selections

BY E.C. GLADSTONE Photos by Jeffery Green



Michael Mina
Bellagio, 5:30-10 p.m. Sun.-Tues. & Thurs.,
5:30-10:30 p.m. Fri.-Sat. 702.693.7223



With an impressive 15 restaurants around the U.S. (and one well-regarded lounge), Michael Mina is one of the most successful chefs in the business. But among his outlets, only two are named simply Michael Mina: his flagship in San Francisco and the one at Bellagio (one Michelin star, four AAA diamonds). Clearly, these are the jewels in the crown.

Upscale American cuisine is how Chef Mina's food is typically described, but that common terminology does it no justice: this is truly internationally inspired cooking, framing the top-quality ingredients in uncommon, comely presentations that spark your senses.

Several menus are offered, including a Cookbook Tasting, which actually notes the pages from which these dishes were taken. The a la carte menu also includes many of Mina's signature tasting trios, presenting lamb, fish or beef in enticing variations.

If ordering by the dish, you would do well to start with the Michael Mina parfait: A strata of alderwood-smoked salmon, crème fraîche and osetra caviar on a potato-shallot cake that is a mouth-filling mélange of salt, savory and creamy sweetness. A seasonal menu also offers a novel chilled seafood plate. Far from your father's raw bar, this selection of uni, mussels, clams and laughing bird shrimp is a fanciful, fresh festival.

Seafood has always been a Mina specialty, and there are many such satisfying selections here. His signature Maine lobster pot pie serves the perfectly cooked crustacean with a rich black truffle cognac in pastry. Thai snapper with sunchoke, bok choy, pineapple marmalade, kaffir lime and a bacon vinaigrette is a dance of earth and ocean in your mouth. The sea scallop with foie gras, phyllo-dusted Dover sole with crab mascarpone brandade, and miso-glazed sea bass are all rich pleasures as well.

From the land, the tasting trio of lamb with different mole sauces is a juicy, aromatic rondo while the Three Sisters plates pork with three fall vegetables. There is an equally inspired surf and turf as well.

Mina has always stressed a certain level of autonomy for his restaurant's executive chefs; here, the recently appointed Marc St. Jacques expresses his creativity in some enticing preparations of his own. Master sommelier Joe Phillips not only pours apropos pairings but shares stories of the wine's sourcing.

This is also the place to impress your vegetarian friends: Michael Mina offers a meat-free tasting menu with dishes like white asparagus velouté and artichoke soufflé that look every bit as delectable as the standard menu—they also adapt other dishes with aplomb. A cheese course, creative desserts and petit fours ends your evening exquisitely.