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Leslie Brenner

With chef Eric Shelton in charge, Kitchen LTO's allure factor grows

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Leslie Brenner

Restaurants and Dining

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Something's definitely working right at Kitchen LTO, Casie Caldwell's "permanent pop-up" restaurant at Trinity Groves. In its second four-month cycle, with

Eric Shelton in charge of the kitchen, the place looks and feels — and tastes — like a place to be.

At lunchtime on a balmy day last week, the patio was hopping. So was the dining room, which designer Stefania Morandi has done an admirable job transforming. The focal point remains a sculptural “tree” in the center of the room, installed by the last designers, Coevál Studio. But Morandi has given the place a more intimate feel by painting the walls black. Sounds crazy, but somehow it warms the place up. Whimsical paintings by Nicola Leoni (a Dallas-based Italian artist) decorate the back wall, brightening the mood.

In case you're late to the LTO party, the pop-up is something like a live, interactive restaurant reality show. Up-and-coming chefs and restaurant designers present concepts, cook dishes and otherwise compete for a panel of judges. Finalists are chosen, and then the public is invited to meet them, taste the chefs' dishes, and vote for their preferred chef and designer. The winning team gets to run the pop-up for four months (LTO stands for limited time only). Once that 4-month pop-up is over, the next one comes in.

Two chef-designer teams into the project, Kitchen LTO is feeling more like a showcase for Modern

American chefs than an edgy pop-up.

Lunch might start with a kale salad. Shelton is smart to briefly blanch Tuscan kale, which softens the leaves, before dressing it in a gingery vinaigrette. Sliced oranges and crushed, toasted cashews go on top — very nice. His tuna tower is better than most, its base of sushi rice topped with glistening ahi tartare and avocado, with bits of fried chicken skin for crunch. His appetizer plates are pretty, with elements that actually contribute to the whole effect — like a stripe of hot Chinese mustard and another of wasabi paste, plus tiny micro shiso leaves whose perfume makes sense. No superfluous silliness.

If you're after a light lunch, main courses could present a challenge. There's "fish frito," Shelton's take on a fritto misto. It's a mini fry-basket filled with morsels of fish, vegetables and (surprise!) cornichons, cloaked in a light batter, fried hot and crisp and served with remoulade sauce. I couldn't resist ordering orzo carbonara topped with a sunny-side-up egg. Super-rich with melted smoked Gouda, parmesan and a lot of bacon, it was delicious, but a little went a long way. Perhaps it would be nicer with a larger pasta shape that would stand up to the sauce. Still, there was something delightfully decadent about eating

something so rich with a glass of crisp grüner veltliner served in elegant stemware — what a welcome touch. Next time I might try Shelton's burger, or maybe bacon-wrapped chopped steak with cipollini onions and oyster mushrooms.

Those seeking something lighter (if something involving bacon can possibly be considered light) might be drawn to the dish that won Shelton the competition — his salmon “BLT,” available at both lunch and dinner. It's a thick fillet of farmed salmon wrapped snugly in bacon that becomes almost like a wet suit as it's cooked. Shelton serves it with a beautiful ring of salad. (Oh, whoops — some silly crumbs made their way onto that otherwise lovely plate.)

“Spaghetti and meatballs,” an appetizer Shelton gives a clever Asian spin, is also on the menu noon and night. Tender chicken meatballs are set on baby Romaine leaves, with cute nests of sesame-flecked soba noodles tucked under the meatballs. Somewhere in there is just the right hit of Sriracha. Toasts spread with avocado-enriched hummus come crowned with perfectly poached Gulf shrimp and a lively pickled radish slaw.

Among the dinnertime mains are pan-seared scallops,

served with baby bok choy and red quinoa, on a lemon confit sauce, or a likeable plate of five-spice duck breast slices, which Shelton sends out with a big dice of charred sweet potato, sautéed Brussels sprouts, drizzles of duck jus and sweet potato purée.

For desserts, there's a buttered popcorn crème brûlée (fun idea, though by no means original), a modernist take on s'mores or bright-colored macarons filled with cinnamon ice cream. Or the most dramatic: the "LTOMG!" chocolate dome. A server pours hot chocolate sauce over it tableside, melting the dome and revealing its sweet filling of strawberry shortcake, cinnamon ice cream and more.

Thirty-eight-year-old Shelton, whose resume includes stints working for David McMillan at Nana Grill and Marc Cassel at the Green Room, has spent the last 11 years as executive chef for Culinaire International (a Dallas-based dining and hospitality company) — not exactly a high-profile job. Though he's not breaking any new ground at Kitchen LTO, he is cooking skillfully, with grace and a measure of flair. He's definitely a chef to watch.

Trinity Groves, 3011 Gulden Lane, Dallas. 214-377-0757. kitchenlto.com. Eric Shelton's run continues through May 31. Open for lunch Monday-Saturday 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.;

dinner Monday–Thursday 5 to 10 p.m., Friday–Saturday 5 to 11 p.m. and Sunday 5 to 8 p.m. • brunch Sunday 11 a.m. to