

THE DISH

Old and New

Situated in Rangoon's grandest of dames, The Strand Restaurant manages to push culinary boundaries without sacrificing its vintage charm. BY DIANA HUBBELL



Chef Christian Martena at The Strand Restaurant.

"ARE YOU READY?" my server asks, before simultaneously pouring dry champagne and liquid nitrogen into a silver bowl. With flourish, he whisks it until the bubbly morphs into a sorbet the color and consistency of fresh snow. While most palate-cleansers are little more than an afterthought, this one comes close to upstaging the blush-pink quail robed in a tawny, toasted coffee sauce that follows. For all the theatricality of its presentation, there's something pure about a dish that contains only two ingredients and tastes of a crisp grand cru.

That balance between the classic and contemporary, between the fanciest of frills and utter simplicity, is what makes **The Strand Restaurant** sing. It took more than seven months to bring new life to the crown jewel of Rangoon's grande dame. To accompany the refurbishment, the hotel chose to embrace a new chef and a daring new dining direction.

"What's great about what we've done with the new décor is that we've kept that sense of place. We've kept the bones, if you will, of this beautiful lady," says chef Christian Martena with a gesture at sleek black-and-white space dotted with crimson roses and lit by chandeliers. "The designer added a contemporary touch without sacrificing the authenticity of the place, which is what I've tried to do with my cuisine. I'm trying to get the classic dishes, but presented in my own way, with my own touch."

Born in Puglia, the fertile heel of Italy's boot, and a veteran of the Bangkok fine-dining scene, Martena was initially reluctant to dive into hotel restaurants. He grew up helping out in his family's eateries and was wary of the "factory food" churned out by some giant

hospitality restaurants. With just 31 suites, though, The Strand maintains an air of intimacy and as the general manager assured him that they wanted to create a restaurant with enough soul to stand on its own, he grew bolder.

"Before I came up with the menu, I read all about the history of The Strand," he says. Sure, dishes like seared foie gras with silky potato mousseline and tortellini filled with duck consommé and foie gras velouté might not have been familiar to the hotel's founders more than a century ago, but they have a timeless elegance that almost certainly would have appealed to them. "All of my dishes have some sort of memories hidden in them. My homeland, my travels are all protagonists."

In the months leading up to the restaurant's grand reopening in December, Martena prepped the public with a series of pop-up dinners at nearby Inya Lake Hotel called La Table du Strand in honor of the immense teakwood table upon which they were served. "My general manager and I passed by these big pieces of teak just lying around and the first thing that came into our minds was that we could have a really beautiful table. These days, most of the teakwood forests are gone and it's very difficult to find wood like this, especially from a tree so large," he says. He runs a hand over the smooth, chestnut-brown finish. "I had some people come up to me the other day and they said, 'Oh, chef, your table has a very sexy touch.'"

Understated and with ancient roots, it serves as a fitting centerpiece for the restaurant. At the pop-up, "People would always share a surprise six-course menu together at this table. They would meet at the restaurant for the first time, so it was always an interesting crowd," he says fondly. "I'd like to have a communal table here as well, so that people can meet and share the experience. For me, that's what food is all about." hotelthestrاند.com; four-course tasting menu US\$58 per person. +

COURTESY OF THE STRAND

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF THE STRAND (2); DIANA HUBBELL



FROM TOP: A blend of classic and contemporary design at The Strand Restaurant; try Martena's slow-cooked quail.

Hot Toddy

ANOTHER RANGOON ICON IS ROLLING OUT A NEW CONCEPT, AND THIS ONE MAY LEAVE YOU REELING, IF YOU KNOW WHAT TO ORDER.

When Rangoon Tea House, a hipster haunt with a menu encompassing everything from biryanis to baos, announced that it would move, there was an initial outcry, until word came out that the restaurant's new incarnation would feature a slick cocktail bar upstairs. Named for the sweet palm wine fermented at toddy plantations, **The Toddy Bar** is already packing in guests with locally inspired tipples like a Jasmine Gin & Tonic, with jasmine tea-infused gin.

"The Toddy Bar was set up almost as an older sister to Rangoon Tea House. If the latter felt like it had one foot in the past and one in the future, so does The The Toddy Bar," says co-founder Htet Myet Oo. And here you'll find the same fastidious attention to detail that has made Rangoon Tea House's revamped curries such a hit. For instance, mixologists boil water to make crystal-clear cubes and spheres of ice unmarred by any pesky bubbles.

"Both the restaurant and bar combine nostalgia, minimalism and a sophisticated take on local culture," Htet says.

The menu is classy but cheeky. "Burmese humor is big on one-liners. The Youk-Kha-Ma-rtini is a play on mother-in-law jokes," Htet says. "Obviously the drink had to be highly potent." Or, as the menu describes it, "unforgiving." It may be the one time to look forward to an evening with your mother-in-law. fb.com/TheToddyBar; drinks for two K12,000.

