In a hip new hotel, Brothers and Sisters makes a stylish splash

By Tom Sietsema Food Critic  January 17, 2018

★★★★ (Good/Excellent)

The Line Hotel DC took forever to open, but the moment it did, last month in Adams Morgan, the brand raised the stakes for lodging in the nation’s capital.

Quick, name another hotel where a dweller can find live radio broadcasts in the lobby and call for a room-service bartender.

Carved from a century-old church, the venue brings together eating opportunities from some of the Mid-Atlantic’s best-known chefs: Spike Gjerde, the James Beard award-winner from Woodberry Kitchen in Baltimore, and Erik Bruner-Yang, whose popular Maketto on H Street NE combines the flavors of Cambodia and Taiwan.

Among the first of six (!) drinking and dining options to open at the Line, owned by the New York-based Sydell Group, is Brothers and Sisters. Developed by Bruner-Yang, the 166-seat restaurant occupies the spacious lobby and its east and west flanks, each with a bar of its own. Guests sitting just inside the entrance can look up to see a spiky chandelier fashioned from organ pipes. Patrons led to the tables to the sides will no doubt be flipping on their flashlights to read about the food and drinks. Like too many restaurants, this one keeps its diners in the dark.

Bruner-Yang, who started talks with the owners in 2012, opted to challenge himself with his first hotel menu. Instead of cooking the Asian food for which he is known, he went out on a limb with the idea of "an American restaurant in
a foreign country,” in this case either Japan or Taiwan, and catering to the natives. As expected of a hotel, this one offers a Caesar salad and hamburger (both pleasing), but the usual suspects are outnumbered by dishes with international roots and several serious splurges, as in caviar tray service for $160.

The menu comes with a notable design quirk. The contents are presented backward. The last page starts with appetizers. Hebrew readers catch the aberration, says Bruner-Yang, and “left-handers are pumped.” Speaking as a right-handed Methodist, I find the layout off-putting, an irritation that tends to be forgiven once a dish such as chicharrones lands on your table. Served as a single shard of deep-fried pork rind, the appetizer is tricked out with espelette pepper, dried nori and crumbled diced pork fat. “You can’t eat these in a library,” jokes a server as he presents the noisy dish, whose crunch moves the needle on my sound meter.

No hunger has been left unaddressed. For the pasta fan, there are knife-cut noodles tossed with pork-fennel sausage and broccoli rabe; vegetarians have buttery avocado set on five-grain (count ’em!) pilaf to consider. Honestly? The latter tastes a little too healthy; spring instead for the Brussels sprouts draped in creamy hot sauce. The most refined dish is the duck consommé, its heady layers of flavor teased from dashi and wonton broth, a clear liquid canvas for delicious hats of duck pasta. Dishes are brought out not in courses, but as they’re ready. From the “simply cooked” category come a marvelous and juicy pork chop accompanied by subtly sweet onion-apple soubise, but also a roast half chicken served tepid with celery root puree: sad on sad.

A few dishes put conversation on hold while diners absorb their novelty. One of them is a chicken chowder bowl, Bruner-Yang’s response to a hotel that wanted chicken noodle soup on its menu. Distancing himself from noodle soups — he has been there, done that, including at the ramen-focused Toki Underground — the chef serves his creamy chowder in the sturdy “bowl” of hollowed-out milk bread. Another talker, also found in the “bread” category, is the snappy octopus hot dog. Some customers refer to the five inches or so of seared cephalopod slipped into a toasted potato roll as “hoctodog,” but I simply know the link as delicious, dotted with pesto and yogurt. Even the french fries, a side dish, stand apart not just for their full potato flavor, but their packaging in a ceramic sleeve designed to look like a fry bag.

Brothers and Sisters is no one-man show. Bruner-Yang recruited some of the best in the business to enliven the Line. They include bar veteran Todd Thrasher, one of the region’s pioneering cocktail craftsmen, to develop the drinks (and wine) menu and Thai native Pichet Ong, the former executive pastry chef for the acclaimed Jean-Georges Vongerichten, to come up with a sweets list. Leading the kitchen day-to-day, meanwhile, is chef de cuisine Harper McClure, formerly of Brabo in Alexandria.

Thrasher, expected to open a rum distillery and tiki bar at the Wharf this spring, is luring imbibers with a host of classic American cocktails, iconic hotel bar drinks and some Line originals, one of which swirls gin, Cocchi Rosa (an aperitif wine), red shiso syrup and vitamin C powder. Ask for the pleasantly herby and
floral “It’s Not Just for Osaka Anymore.” I also applaud what the future holds: Roving punch carts in the lobby, which feels like a cross between a train station and a university library when you look up to see groups of people strolling in with luggage or clusters of laptop users settled in with drinks and snacks at the long, dark tables outfitted with reading lights.

Ong’s desserts are very much to my taste, more savory than sweet. The chef reimagines cheesecake as a white berg marrying three kinds of fromage, including goat cheese, and slips banana and chocolate mousse into his tall wedge of chocolate cake covered in whipped cream. One night, I looked up to see Ong with a big glass bowl of strawberry trifle. “Help yourself,” he said. What looked like a bribe was in fact the pastry chef extending the invitation to any party ordering two or more desserts. Also a bit of brand building on the part of Ong, who told Bruner-Yang, “I’m going to walk around the dining room.” Go, Ong! Some of us can never have too much table-side service.

Bruner-Yang has another restaurant up his sleeve here: Spoken English, which he has described as a standing-room-only “restaurant speakeasy.” (A Rake’s Progress, from Gjerde, is expected to roll out with a game focus by the end of January.) Already, though, the fledgling Line is making a splash, the ripple effects of which are sure to lift the lodging landscape and burnish the neighborhood’s cred as a seriously fun food scene.

Top left: Diners in the lobby area at Brothers and Sisters in the Line Hotel. The second level is A Rake’s Bar. Top right: Chicken chowder is served in a hollowed-out “bowl” of milk bread. Below: Pastry chef Pichet Ong works three cheeses into the cheesecake. (Deb Lindsey for The Washington Post)