LINE LA’s Chef Josiah Citrin and The Happy Hour Agency Talk F&B

By Eliza Jordan

In February for the inaugural edition of Frieze Los Angeles, we found ourselves in L.A. to explore the fair and its surrounding events. We also made it a priority to explore the city’s dynamic cultural scene, full of art, design, fashion, hospitality, and gastronomy. In each neighborhood, one can find hidden gems among (or within) the obvious musts. One of those is the LINE L.A. hotel in Koreatown—an obvious must indeed, but one with an array of hidden gems inside. Walking in, visitors can get a coffee fix on the left at the café, Alfred’s, or a fashion fix on the right at the boutique, Poketo. Straight back at the end of the lobby lounge is the Lobby Bar, and upstairs on the rooftop is the restaurant Openaire.

There’s more (like Break Room 86, the Gramercy Garden, and The Speek Suite), but we had to be choosers while there and scout out a few cocktails and dishes we were dying to try. First, we ventured to Openaire and enjoyed brunch while within a greenhouse terrace. Then, we made our way back down to the Lobby Bar for post-meal sips of delectable cocktails. At each, we were immersed with new knowledge—concepts and recipes only found here.

Whitewall caught back up with Openaire’s Chef, Josiah Citrin, and the team responsible for the cocktails downstairs, Happy Hour Agency—led by Connie Shen, Irene Martinez, and Eliana Dominguez—to learn more about the establishments’ programming, and what makes them unique.

WHITEWALL: Chef Josiah, tell us a bit about your experience in the culinary world leading up to Openaire.

JOSIAH CITRIN: My career in the kitchen started in France. I worked in the kitchens there for three years, and when I came back, I started at Chinois on Main under Chef Wolfgang Puck. Since then, I’ve opened my two-star Michelin restaurant Mélisse in Santa Monica, which is having its 20-year anniversary this summer, as well as Charcoal Venice, which opened in December of 2015. I also have Dave’s Doghouse, which is located in a few different stadiums across the country, including at Staples Center in Los Angeles. Openaire was really my first venture out of the westside.

WW: What was the starting point for the menu at Openaire?

JC: Because I’ve been a westside guy my whole life, it was really important to understand my new neighborhood. I spent a lot of time trying to connect and understand Koreatown and the people that live there. Different ingredients like Doenjang and popular dishes like Jogaetang (Korean clam stew) have inspired some of our first dishes on the menu—like the Spicy Little Neck Clams with Caledonian Shrimp, Ube Yam Tofu, Crispy Rice Noodles, and our Snake River Farms Sirloin with Yu Choy and Toasted Garlic Brown Butter Doenjang.
WW: When we were at Openaire, we elected to try the “bar cart experience,” which basically allows guests to have an unlimited choice of small bites from a bar cart that passes by throughout brunch. Tell us a bit about this.

JC: The bar cart experience is a new offering at brunch that allows people to get a taste of little bites, kind of similar to dim sum. It's a great opportunity for us to show off really delicious one or two bite items and very fun for the guests because of how interactive it is. There's a sense of excitement and giddiness seeing the cart start to roll towards your table.

WW: What's your favorite dish on the menu?

JC: My favorite dish on the menu right now is the Asparagus with Miso Cured Egg, Crispy Maitake, and Garum Mayo. A bit of a play of one of my all-time favorites and classic dish, Asparagus Mimosa, it's a very springtime dish. The asparagus is sweet and the miso cured egg and crispy maitake add the perfect amount of saltiness and umami flavor to it.

WW: What do you feel makes the restaurant truly special?

JC: Not only is the space spectacular, but I think the approach to our dishes make us unique. Being in the heart of Koreatown, we've been inspired by many of those unique ingredients or popular dishes and try to transform them into something different but still has that indescribable feeling of familiarity or comfort.

WW: Where do you like to eat when you're not in the kitchen?

JC: Parks BBQ is a classic spot in Koreatown, and it's one of my favorites. I always have a great time there.

WW: While at the Lobby Bar, we were walked through cocktails a few different cocktails, while bartenders showed us house-made bitters and the use of peppers and spices for infusion—like chipotle pepper-infused tequila. Tell us a bit about your use of natural ingredients for cocktails.

HAPPY HOUR AGENCY: We’ve always made a point to use natural ingredients in our cocktails that challenge the drinker to step a bit outside of their element. We love to incorporate a variety of flavor profiles ranging from earthy to tart to spicy to fruity. In this menu alone we feature: red jalapeños, mushrooms, chipotle, serrano, schisandra berry, prickly pear, and hibiscus, just to name a few.

WW: There are tons of bars in L.A. What makes this one unique?

HHA: We feel what makes this bar unique is that we tell a true Angeleno story. We wanted to highlight different elements and flavors unique to Los Angeles and more specifically, Koreatown. We use a lot of spirits distilled and produced in California and incorporate ingredients sourced from local vendors such as mole from Chiles Secos at Grand Central Market.

WW: What’s the hottest cocktail on the menu right now?

HHA: Hey Bae is likely the hottest cocktail on the menu. It’s a bright pear-flavored cocktail served in a traditional Korean rice bowl with a beautiful pink color. We even made a custom pear sticker that goes on the lid of the drink. What’s not to like?

WW: Where do you like to go for cocktails in L.A., when you’re not behind the bar?

HHA: We’re always trying new bars and restaurants but have a soft spot for local hangs in Highland Park, like Good Housekeeping, Blind Barber, and Johnny’s Bar.