

Photography by Paula Wilson

RECONSTRUCTION ZONE

Claudio Aprile breaks down food barriers at his lively Toronto restaurant // By Alan McGinty

There are no starters, mains, lunches or brunches at Colborne Lane. “I don’t subscribe to mainstream,” declares chef and co-owner Claudio Aprile. “It’s boring and homogenized. I want to create food that’s original.”

Small, tapas-style plates can’t begin to describe Aprile’s concoctions — such as the rare tuna with soy sauce flash-frozen with liquid nitrogen, airy wasabi foam, seaweed, lake trout roe, avocado and crunchy nori. Or the vanilla-glazed ocean trout with salsa, aloe vera, warm lemon custard and wilted greens. Or even an amuse-bouche like the mini plastic basting syringe filled with yellow tomato soup, which diners squirt into their mouths after eating a skewer of cubed buffalo mozzarella, Thai basil and half a grape. He’s not kidding when he says “original.”

Colborne Lane is a joint venture with Hanif Harji (Blowfish, Kultura), tucked in behind Toronto’s King Edward Hotel. With its opening in February, Aprile stepped onto centre stage after a six-year stint at Senses. Its owner, Henry Wu (who also owns Metropolitan Hotels and the midtown hot spot Lai Toh Heen), remains a “huge supporter” of Aprile’s talent.

Aprile has travelled widely, spending time in London (at Sugar Club) and Thailand, paying special attention to the food and to other chefs — like Ferran Adria. Adria is the chef of Northeastern Spain’s El Bulli, a restaurant considered by many to be the best in the world. “I dropped in for a visit,” says Aprile. “It was an amazing experience. I learned a lot.” London’s Marco Pierre White is another of Aprile’s heroes, and Toronto heavyweight Mark McEwan, who runs Bymark and North 44 (where Aprile apprenticed) is a trusted mentor.

Aprile, 38, has a loyal following, and what sets both chef and restaurant apart are not just novel ingredients and combinations, but also new techniques. With technology such as immersion circulators, liquid nitrogen and thermomixers boasting twice the pulverizing power, Aprile and his team are busy reconstructing familiar items into delicate foams, crunchy bites or frozen sauces. For example, he transforms the humble beet into a perfect, red cube of gelatin,

which tastes exactly like a beet, but is more playful.

With bare brick walls, supporting pillars and high ceilings in a 125-year-old building, the 50-seat restaurant is stylish and sleek. But huge back windows overlooking fire escapes, dumpsters and graffiti lend it an element of grit. The music is loud, but lively diners drown it out as wait staff circle the room, including a long communal table where strangers are seated together.

The atmosphere is relaxed, but there’s discipline behind it; waiters come in early because they want their sections perfect. And the service is excellent. “Nothing in here is an accident,” says Aprile. “The music’s loud because I want it loud. The plates are small and there are lots of them. I don’t like precious things. You don’t have to put on a suit and speak softly. There’s life here.” Not to mention amazing food.

A team of cooks prepares individual items but Aprile puts each plate together. That means he works 70 or 80 hours a week, serving 120 covers a night (Colborne Lane is open Tuesday through Saturday). “I see my cooks more than I see my wife and son,” says Aprile, who left cooking school after a year so he wouldn’t end up with the “same sensibility” as other chefs.

Four plates per person are recommended and there are many wines by the glass. But with dishes ranging from \$12 to \$28 and wines from \$11 to \$15 a glass, it’s not for the light of wallet. The wine list is small but pleasing, with a few Alsatian aromatics and even that rare Spanish treat, Albariño — a great match for the seafood and strong flavours.

Aprile’s concept isn’t for everyone — the unfamiliar menu structure and sometimes shocking flavour and texture combinations require effort to get more cautious locals on board — but American and European visitors usually “get it,” he says.

And as if one hot restaurant isn’t enough, Aprile is at it again: Bar Crudo is scheduled to open in September near the Drake Hotel in Toronto’s Queen West neighborhood. Its theme will “have a more Japanese slant to it, but a lot of Mediterranean, too,” says Aprile, who smiles for the first time when the interview ends.

The man is serious, and a seriously good chef. □



CHANGING LANES:
After moving from
Senses, Claudio Aprile
quickly put his stamp
on Colborne Lane.