

At the Temple of Earthly Delights

More than five years in the making, Buggs Temple finally delivers the goods.

BY TERRY KIRTS

Ah, Buggs Temple. You trickster, you rascal among restaurants. All signs implied you might open as early as December 2005. So we skulked about you, stealing glimpses inside the historic 1918 church being restored as your home. We redirected our jogging paths to the north end of the Canal, with intentions of working off extra calories so that we might sip and nosh guiltlessly in the glow of your skyline views. Then you didn't open, not just for a few months, but for *two years*. You kept us waiting through sunny seasons when we would have loved to lounge on your verandas. How you teased and tempted us.

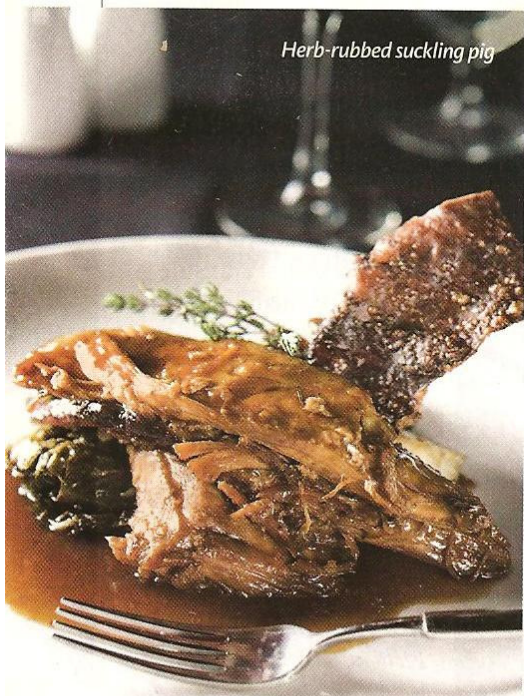
We knew you would come around eventually. But after being patient for so long, we expected a lot. Good food would not be enough. We wanted expertly executed seasonal fare that would make us rethink Hoosier cuisine: house-smoked meats and fish, elegant soups and salads, sigh-inducing desserts. And we couldn't have just any old restaurant space. We wanted everything you promised—a multi-storied dining complex with a fine-dining “tavern,” a casual grill for lunch, even a coffee-house and a Ritter's Frozen Custard stand for post-workout treats.

I could be coy and hold off on saying whether Buggs Temple is finally living up to the hype. But since I'm not a very patient guy myself, I'll let you know: It was definitely worth the wait.

When an amuse bouche of tuna tartare with luscious bits of avocado arrived on one of our first visits, we knew the Buggs staff had spent the time getting some things right. Then came an appetizer of smoked trout cakes, ultra creamy and deeply aromatic, served with a tasty melange of greens, beets, and a piquant poblano remoulade. Tangy, sweet twice-grilled quail followed, served with pomegranate barbecue sauce and delicious turnips. The calamari proved to be some of the lightest and crispiest we had ever eaten. Even a simple salad gained surprising richness from a dressing of shagbark-hickory syrup, ginger, and soy. With starters this good, it was easy to forgive the delay.

But really, why was the opening pushed back so many times? Anyone who has renovated a home or even watched a cable show about it could forgive some holdup. When Chuck and Vicki Mack, longtime Indianapolis restaurateurs, finally got into the space after having their eye on it for years, they found they would have to shore up the foundation, completely gut the place, and build it up again from the inside out. The Macks took advantage of the delay, visiting area estate auctions to gather architectural fixtures that would give the former Simpson Methodist

Herb-rubbed suckling pig



Episcopal Church (renamed in 1969 for its minister, Rev. James C. Buggs) some of its former character. Stained glass came from a church in Ohio; chairs, light fixtures, and ironwork had previous lives in the old Athletic Club downtown.

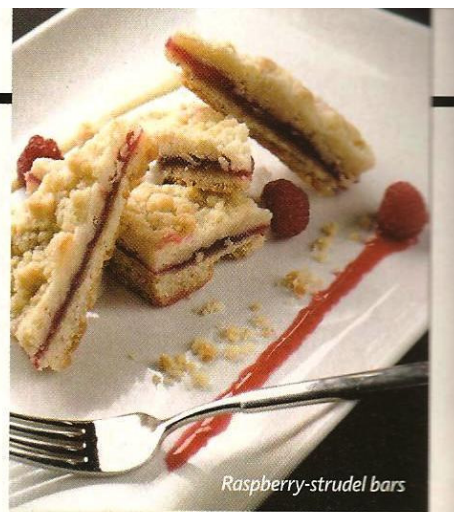
The extra time also gave Chef Brad Gates, whom the Macks pegged well before opening, a chance to fine-tune the food. Gates brings a colorful resume with him to Indianapolis. He worked at such illustrious eateries as New York City's Union Square Cafe and even put in time at Britney Spears' now-defunct Nyla, before returning to open Puck's at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. Perhaps as a result of all that contact with the stars, his menu can be a tad precious. An herb reduction "naps" his roasted chicken, and we learn a bit much about the former lives of the piglets and quail on our plates. But his superior skill is obvious, and his attention to local ingredients and housemade preparations is not mere showmanship.

Gates's dishes range from delicately delicious to wholesome but haute. At one extreme are buttery beef tenderloin medallions seared on just one side to ensure they're still rare on the other. The beef is exceptionally tender, though the portion is modest for \$34, and its chanterelle risotto tends to be overcooked. By contrast, a big plate of garlicky,

herb-scented suckling pig is a dish for the heartiest of eaters. Different cuts of the pork, along with a square of crispy skin, lend nice variety to the dish. Local lamb chops come with delectable twice-baked fingerling potatoes, and striped bass is accompanied by a rich but balanced—and unexpected—persimmon beurre blanc.

Service is one bug that wasn't entirely worked out before opening. Wine service and a meager wine list need particular help. While friendly, staff can be a little awkward and distracted, a point made uncomfortably clear to us one night at the bar, when a delay in drink orders led a manager to snap at a hostess across our table. The waiter who finally did show up to help us suddenly stopped mid-sentence, inexplicably, and took the next table's order. We hope diners won't have to wait much longer for these sorts of issues to iron themselves out.

At meal's end, pastry chef Cindy Hawkins's innovative desserts come "infused" with special reductions she hopes to use in flavoring custom versions of Ritter's Frozen Custard downstairs. Her apple tarte tatin has an especially deep but fresh apple taste. Crumbly, buttery raspberry-strudel bars are perfect with coffee. While the banana tart falls short when the fruit is past its moment, it is a star on its best nights, with a scoop of Traders Point Creamery ice cream—just the kind of dessert I dreamed of while jogging along the Canal.



Raspberry-strudel bars

BUGGSTEMPLE
337 W. 11th St., 735-7960,
buggstemple.com

HOURS Grille: Mon.–Sat. 11 a.m.–4 p.m. Tavern: Tues.–Sat. 4–10 p.m.

CUISINE A seasonal menu highlights the wealth of Hoosier farmsteads with meats and seafood cured and smoked in house. The more casual Grille offers highlights of the Tavern menu at lunchtime.

PRICES Lunch entrees \$8 to \$16; dinner first courses \$7 to \$16; main courses \$18 to \$36; desserts \$6 to \$8; wine by the glass \$8 to \$14

ATMOSPHERE Housed in a 1918 church on the White River Canal downtown, the restaurant complex features reclaimed architectural fixtures from the old Athletic Club and several Midwestern churches. But contemporary industrial touches bring the past into the 21st century.

PEDIGREE Chuck and Vicki Mack, formerly of Broad Ripple's Provincial Kitchen and current owners of Cornerstone Coffee House and Moe & Johnny's, have teamed up with a small group of investing partners to bring to life a renovation project five years in the making.

SERVICE Waitstaff ranges from chatty but unpolished to nervous and aloof; bar service can be disorganized, though staff members are generally helpful.

TRY IF YOU LIKE Elements, L'Explorateur, Peterson's

A PERFECT MEAL

TABLE

Patio seat on the west end of the veranda with a stunning skyline view

FIRST COURSE

Delicate but rich and aromatic smoked trout cakes with poblano remoulade

SECOND COURSE

Herb-rubbed, cherry-smoked suckling pig with roasted potatoes

DRINK

Maker's Mark Manhattan

DESSERT

Apple tarte tatin, in season, with vanilla ice cream



Smoked trout cakes