

# CITRUS

**Prologue:** Michel Richard is one of the few iconic Los Angeles chefs to have fared better on the East Coast. Though he shuttered Citrus L.A. in 2001, his Washington DC flagship, Citronelle, is a perennial power dining spot. His decision to return to L.A. and reinvent Citrus, albeit on a "consulting chef" basis, generated a lot of buzz. But his choice of venue — inside Jeffrey Chodorow's Social Hollywood — was curious.

A quick phone interview settles the question of why: Jeffrey Chodorow and Michel Richard are friends, Social needed help on the dining front, and Michel wants to spend more time Los Angeles. It doesn't resolve the real question, though, which was "Can this odd pairing actually work?"

Thus, further investigation — involving, all five senses — is deemed necessary...

## The Evening

The hosts at the front are a friendly trio, though clad in the obligatory black. Service is smooth and professional — all except the owner, who's loud and cheerful like a French papa bear. Literally and figuratively, he's larger than life. An outrageous flirt who switches fluidly between languages, Richard tablehops all night, charming his guests to pieces.

The décor in Citrus is a bit of a surprise. Though this restaurant is actually housed in a nightclub, it feels less clubby than 99% of the restaurants in Los Angeles. The color scheme is silky apple green and rich cream; the lighting glows peachy-gold, and there are no sharp edges whatsoever. Michel compares the restaurant to the inside of a citrus fruit, but this isn't quite accurate. With its vaulted ceilings, mirrored columns and gauzy curtains, it's a cross between an 18th century French ballroom, a giant hot air balloon, and a Midsummer Night's Dream.

On a weeknight six weeks after opening, the dining room is pleasantly half-full, with an interesting mixture of glossy Hollywood types, elegant older couples, and East Coast visitors.



Two middle-aged gentlemen dressed in black are sitting in the back, having a serious conversation over a bottle of wine. They look like priests. However, they drink like fish. They turn out to be a visiting food writer from the New Yorker and Alain Giraud, currently of Anisette and previously of Bastide. Both gentlemen are longtime friends and contemporaries of Richard.

In all recent interviews and press, Richard references new, light recipes, and fun dishes for the under-25s that frequent Hollywood. This is fine and fabulous, for surely some diners enjoy black-ink risotto that looks like caviar, or mixed carpaccio that looks like a mosaic. But it's likely that in France, a chalkboard menu with three items — 72-hour short ribs, frites and the garlic roast chicken — would keep the locals happy.

Michel Richard's 72-hour short ribs are legendary. They bear no resemblance to any other short ribs. First, they're not glazed, rubbed or otherwise disguised. Second, they have a different texture. Third, there's not a rib in sight. Slow-cooked at a very low heat for three days, they end up almost smoked, and so flavorful, every bite requires



a moment of appreciation. Meanwhile, the butter-fried frites, which arrive in a cone with several dipping sauces, are golden-crispy sat fat heaven.

And finally, the desserts. Richard started out as a pastry chef, and sweets are still his strength. The dessert platter spans a spectrum of flavors so pleasurable, you don't feel quite decent experiencing them in public. The caramel crème brulee with whipped cream is cool and sublime under a whisper-thin sugar shell.

## The Conclusion

Not all the advance buzz on this place was good — but after experiencing Citrus firsthand, we'll chalk most of the nastiness up to sour grapes (there are always a few who want the mighty to fall) and sheer inexperience. Bottom line, if Michel Richard wants to bring Los Angeles a happy, well-lit place to come and enjoy his short ribs, we're glad to have him back. And the clubby cocktails are a bonus.

- Lena Katz

