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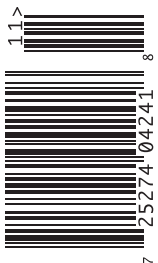
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La Colombe D'or (a.k.a. "Cinq")

RATING: ★★★★★

3410 Montrose Blvd.
713.524.7999

What the stars mean:

★ = fair, some noteworthy qualities;

★★ = good, above average;

★★★ = very good, well above norm;

★★★★ = excellent, among the area's best;

★★★★★ = extraordinary in every detail.

Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service.

WHY GO *Storied haunt is reinvented without ceasing to be a classic.*

PARKING *There's a valet out front of the hotel, for those wishing to make a grand entrance; also self-parking in the back when there's no wedding in Le Grand Salon.*

BAR BITES *New cocktails meant to augment old-fashioned martinis, Manhattans and Negronis are in development for the walnut-paneled bar, as a bar menu touting a shrimp BLT is already on offer.*

WHERE ART THOU? *The hotel has a cool art gallery with works by such notables as Van den Bulcke, famed for strange combinations of people, some of whom are nude.*

WONDER WALLS *Hotel décor includes decades of press clips, going back to one about a lunch special tied to the price of a barrel of oil.*

HOURS *Lunch Mon.-Fri. 11AM-2PM, dinner nightly 6PM-10:30PM*

PRICES *Apps \$8-\$24, entrees \$25-\$42, sides \$9, desserts \$7-\$12*

GOOSE! *Foie gras with fruit and brown butter and, above, clockwise from right, the redecorated dining room, house-cured Scottish gravlox with egg and caviar, and classic cocktails at the bar*



French Revolution

A famous family's young sons refashion fine dining at La Colombe d'Or, 30 years old this month

| By John DeMers | Photography by Debora Smail |

I stand in the heart of historic Montrose (recalling a time before the T-shirt shops and CD stores, the second-hand boutiques and pickup bars that have come to epitomize the post-transitional enclave, especially around its celebrated fringes) among the kind of leafy grounds an oil tycoon would build a big mansion long before anyone imagined a *neighborhood* might appear.

This is La Colombe d'Or—a '20s "Prairie School" architectural grandiosity with sand-colored brick, a huge veranda and broad shade trees all around. It's a residence from long ago, remade as a baby-grand European hotel and restaurant where I've come for a retro entrée, served up with a fascinating side order of the future.

"Welcome to Cinq," says Hollywood-stubby ex-college-jock Dan Zimmerman, 26, before he breaks into a laugh, realizing I won't know that he's talking about *this* place. "Though most people haven't heard of it yet."

Zimmerman understates. *Nobody* has heard of it yet, outside the Zimmerman family that has operated La Colombe d'Or as a timeless sanctuary of European and especially French finesse for 30 years this month.

In fact, the family gives every indication of having just made the big decision five minutes earlier, as part of its Herculean effort, under sons Dan and Mark, to drag the former Fondren Mansion into the 21st century.

So it's Cinq. As in *five* in French. As in the five senses. As in the five suites La Colombe d'Or offers upstairs. The restaurant's meant-to-be-hip new name is distinct for the first time from that of the hotel, which is best known as a *très* traditional wedding venue, complete with a ballroom outfitted with imported 20-foot oak panels carved for French royalty around 1715.

"We'll definitely keep the European, especially the French, techniques," offers new exec chef Jeramie Robison, 27, the Louisiana native and Huckleberry Finn doppelgänger who's been charged with making the restaurant feel and taste new, while at the same time making sure it remains worthy of its heritage. His résumé includes stints at the Mansion on Turtle Creek in Dallas and alongside David Burke in New York City.

"But my love of cooking is real eclectic," he adds, forming an aw-shucks grin that would CONTINUED...



GRAND HOTEL La Colombe d'Or, originally a residence, has been a hotel and eatery for 30 years this month. Many staffers have been on board for decades. Above: the Caprese salad.

“My love of cooking is real eclectic,” says new exec chef Robison, 27, forming an aw-shucks grin that would make his doppelgänger Huckleberry Finn proud. “I’m young. I’m still playing with my food.”

...CONTINUED make Huck proud. “I’m young. I’m still playing with my food.”

By giving the place its own name, *pater familias* Steve Zimmerman has let The Boys (as Dan and Mark, 23, are invariably called within these walls) put their stamp on a landmark, pulling it more into line with the extended family’s more contemporary Zimm’s wine bar and new New-Orleans-oyster-bar-meets-Provençal-*pétanque*-café Zimm’s Little Deck. Both places are within walking distance of the hotel, in one of the few Houston ’hoods that remembers how to use its feet.

In terms of décor, the Vision Design of Dallas, a group of alums from the Mansion’s Rosewood Hotels, has ushered La Colombe d’Or into the present tense, at times ironically by returning things to their past glory. Dining rooms feel more open after the carpet was stripped away to reveal original dark-stained hardwood floors. White-clothed tables are surrounded by updated parsons chairs in brown leather and cream suede, set against walls of ivory with hints of sage. Colombe’s collection of abstract-tilting European contemporary art, mostly housed in a third-floor gallery and all available for sale, spills into common areas and the dining room.

One thing that’s not new, however, is the service staff. Many servers have been here forever. But they *have* been liberated from their tuxes, refocused on fun in crisp shirts and ties beneath mismatched vests found in Lower Westheimer vintage shops. Something old, something new—that’s what this re-imagined eatery is all about. And never more clearly than on Robison’s menu.

Instead of one long multi-page menu, the approach adhered to in Paris, Cinq features two menus printed side-by-side on the same horizontal page. To the right, I spot a selection of La Colombe d’Or classics, such as the

still popular rack of lamb. To the left are new seasonal creations, drawing together more varied and intriguing influences than the profoundly French right side.

Appetizers feature a big surprise: octopus that’s *tender*. The menu suggests that that’s because it’s braised, but I suspect some more involved (and secret) tenderizing process. The result is phenomenal—juicy, full of mild sea flavors, set atop an avocado aioli. There’s also garlic purée and a salad of chorizo and celery heart on the plate. Other nifty choices from these “New Ideas” include the Caledonia Prawns, perfect with the Bordignon polenta (think shrimp and cheese grits), and the crusted fried oysters with sweet-tart pineapple remoulade and a bacon-horseradish hollandaise.

For entrees, Robison’s talents visit equally on seafood and meat. In the seafood mode, I’d recommend either his cast-iron seared sea scallops with French-inspired celery root puree and roasted wild mushrooms—or the Asian-ized pan-seared Chilean sea bass with jasmine rice, peanuts, caramelized ginger, soy glaze and a frothy curry sauce called *nage*.

I think it’s cool the way the chef, as noted in his meat section, blends old and new French in his farm-raised rabbit and Anjou pear, a roasted loin plus an even more tender leg, the latter slow-cooked in its own fat to become *confit*, both in a mustard sauce kissed with Poire Williams brandy. And my usually limitless red-meat appetite is actually satisfied by his fork-tender braised beef short ribs with red-wine stewed cabbage and a two-tone sauce of savory veal demi-glace balanced with sweet corn *velouté*. One or both of these main courses, with a dish of Cinq’s truffle mac for the table, should leave you happy indeed. Or ready to trundle upstairs to bed.

Robison seems well capable of updating the makeup and presentation of the “Classic” dishes. But just because he *can* doesn’t mean he *should*; honestly, if you want escargots Bourguignon or French onion soup or cream-lush lobster bisque, you probably don’t want any weird stuff done to it. These dishes and their kin remain what La Colombe d’Or is known for among older locals. Admirably, the young restaurateurs and their young chef have a commitment to making them right and true. In addition to the herb-roasted rack of baby Colorado lamb, excellent choices from the classic side include my beloved rib-eye with green peppercorn sauce.

Sometimes, even adventurous diners revert to old standbys when it comes to dessert, and Cinq has some of the best classic crème brulee anywhere, regardless of the new name over the door. Still, if you want to turn over a new leaf, make it a great one: the milk chocolate and cinnamon cake with *dulce de leche* icing, partnered on the plate with homemade vanilla bean ice cream.

In the months ahead, the Zimmermans Colombe d’Or will continue facing their fascinating new challenge: convincing young, stylish Houstonians that a place they think of as their parents’ occasion restaurant is actually a place *they* should go any night of the week. So far, word is that business is good; they’re even getting walk-ins, surely a sign that the freshening-up has indeed made the old haunt more inviting to new customers. I’m putting my francs—or, damn it, euros—on the Zimmermans. *Père et fils.* **H**