



Flamed scallops. Pictures by Karleen Minney



Wagyu beef tartare tacos.



AZD brulée.

The newest hot ticket in town

Amy Martin

There are certain moments in this job where you feel like a fortune teller, looking into a crystal ball.

You can tell when a restaurant is going to go well, when a dish is going to be a hit and when a venue is not long for this world.

And when I wrote this time last year that Canberrans could expect more - and different types of - Korean food options popping up over the city, it was one of those moments.

So that is to say, when the team at East Hotel announced that their latest addition, Azuma Den, would be a Korean-Japanese fusion restaurant, it felt very of the moment.

Azuma Den is full for this late Saturday booking. The hibachi grill sitting front and centre wafts a comforting scent of the chargrill through the restaurant.

There's a playfulness to Azuma Den - with water served from giant glass bottles shaped like soy sauce fish, and a painting of a wise old man affectionately known as Steve.

The drinks menu is curated and not overly long, and we opt for a yuzu sake - which is sweet and syrupy without being sickly - and a plum mocktail that has almost a savoury tartness to it that reminds me of preserved plums.

We kick off the food with the Wagyu beef tartare tacos (\$24), served with a nashi pear and cucumber filling. The fried wonton shell delicately snaps in your mouth as you bite into it, releasing a nuttiness from the meat, perhaps sesame oil, as well as a slight flavour of fermented chilli. The finely diced cucumber adds a nice crunch, although the



Azuma Den at the East Hotel.

pear seems a little lost in the mix.

The flamed scallops that land on the table next (\$16) are sitting in a melted yuzu butter, and have a sprinkling of salmon roe on top. They're tender and warming, with a slight smokiness from the grill.

Having dined at Azuma Den a couple of times already - and having loved the lobster, prawn and scallop dumplings - we decide to try something a little different tonight, opting for the pork and ginger option (\$24).

Pan-fried with a crispy bottom, and filled with Byron Bay Berkshire pork, soy and shishito pepper oil, it's a classic dumpling combination that is well-cooked. I wouldn't have minded a little more of the ginger peaking through in the flavour - particularly since it was in the title - but otherwise it's a solid offering.

15/20

AZUMA DEN

Address: East Hotel, 69 Canberra Ave, Griffith ACT 2603

Phone: (02) 6178 0007

Website: azumaden.com.au

Hours: Open for lunch Wednesday to Sunday. Open for dinner seven days.

Access: Lower level is accessible

Dietary: Plenty of choices

Noise: Well managed

But on to the chicken; there are two options on the menu. The first - Jun's Korean fried chicken - is perfect for those looking for a little heat. Tonight, though, we've opted for the classic soy and garlic option (\$28).

Now, I am not exaggerating when I say that I have never had fried chicken this tender before. Marinating the meat in mirin for 24 hours before frying ensures that the meat is super tender, while still being super crispy on the outside. The soy and garlic sauce is a good, non-spicy option, but I wouldn't have minded a little more of it sauce coating the outside. It's served with some pickled Korean radish, however, and this is the addition I didn't know my fried chicken was missing. The tang of the pickle cuts through the chicken and just enhances everything.

And if that wasn't enough pickles for us, we also added some pineapple and ginger pickles on the side (\$6). This fun, almost side salad of a dish, is salty more than it is

sweet, which, considering the pineapple, is unexpected but delightful. Paired with a mix of pickled carrot, capsicum and tomato, this is a great palate cleanser in between dishes.

We round out the savoury dishes with 400g Korean pork ribs (\$35). Using Byron Bay Berkshire pork, again, along with a gochujang marinade, these are tender, with the meat easily coming off the bones. For the most part, each morsel is very meaty, with just a slight heat to them - although there are a couple in our serve that are a little skippy when it comes to the meat.

We end the night with a couple of desserts. The first, recommended by our server, is the AZD brulée, with mandarin and ginger (\$18). It's quite large in size - a good option for those wanting to share - and has a nice crack when you hit the hard sugar top. It's super creamy, and the citrus notes really add an interesting element to a classic.

The coconut meringue (\$18), on the other hand, is far from a reinvented classic. The sticky log of coconut meringue reminds me of a macaroon, but is a little tougher to get through. We are warned, that is how it's meant to be and the thick miso yuzu caramel custard it sits on is designed to be paired with it, making it easier to consume. On top, there are a few chargrilled mandarin pieces that add a smokiness to the few bites they accompany.

Tonight's meal feels energised, breathing new life into a space that has been empty for a while. It's the forefront of food trends, but it also feels as if it has longevity for not only the people who stay at East Hotel, but also anyone just looking for dinner options in Kingston.

HOW WE SCORE Of 20 points, 10 are awarded for food, five for service, three for ambience, two for wow factor.

12 Reasonable 13 Solid and satisfactory 14 Good 15★ Very good 16★★ Seriously good 17★★★ Great 18★★★★ Excellent 19★★★★★ Outstanding 20★★★★★ The best of the best