

A seasoned chef brings pan-Asian flair to new Kits hotspot

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BLOG



ANDREW MORRISON | waiterblog.com

The Flying Tiger

2958 W. 4th
604 737-7529, TheFlyingTiger.ca
Food ★★★★★ Service ★★★★★
Atmpsphere ★★★★★ Value ★★★★★

Tina Fineza is known for squeezing big flavours onto small plates. She was chef at Bin 941 and George Ultra Lounge before falling off the radar shortly after the latter's opening, but now she's back, this time in one of the more relaxed *arrondissements* of the Republic of Kitsilano.

Housed in what used to be the long-lived Living Room Bistro — a charming, casual place with honest neighbourhood character — the Flying Tiger is already drawing quite a crowd. A top-to-bottom facelift might have added a bland-ish dash of hip appeal, and its soundtrack may have quickened a beat, but the real attraction is Fineza's pan-Asian "street food" concept.

When my dining companions and I arrived for dinner last week, there was plenty of room for us in the refitted and darkly lit room (think *Scooby Doo* ninja lair meets Cactus Club on a budget), but we made straight for the kitchen bar instead. Watching Fineza in action is a treat; unfortunately, the view of her is blocked by a blacked-out sneeze guard. I sat at one of the choicest spots, and was able to choose our first few plates by chatting Fineza up as she prepped dishes destined for other tables. As she has done so well in the past, she's structured the menu into "smaller" and "larger" sections. The dishes are built for sharing and make for easy conversation starters, slipping as they do in and out of Japan while on side trips to China, Korea and the Philippines before moving on like a hungry cyclone to Vietnam, Thailand and India.

We started by sharing the signature samosas (\$6), delicious and crisp triangles stuffed with cumin-dusted smashed potatoes and peas, outdone by a coconut and tamarind chutney for dipping. A fight for the last one was stopped only by the sweet and heavy aromas of soy, coriander, curry and kimchi wafting out of pans and woks as Fineza whirled about, plating



PHOTO: DOUG SHANKS

The Flying Tiger owner James Iranzad (left) and chef Tina Fineza, with galbi style Korean beef short ribs.

dishes and softly ordering her underlings about with a balanced economy of words and movement. (It was great to watch her doing her thing, but I was saddened to learn she's already on her way out this fall. She told me her mandate had always been to dream up the Flying Tiger's concept, write its menu, train the staff, and then split. Bummer. Still, her crew looked a capable enough bunch, so I suppose the real test of the place will be written after she's gone.)

Some pulled duck confit — redolent with lime, green onion and jicama — quickly followed (\$14). I have a soft spot for duck confit in all its guises, but these flavourful shreds, stuffed inside thin pancakes smelling of sesame, basil and mint, were of an aromatherapy calibre, reminding me what it is that draws me in the first place to pan-Asian restaurants like the Flying Tiger, as well Main Street's Monsoon East West Brasserie and the more cookie-cutter Red Door on Granville.

The galbi-style Korean beef short ribs were softened and densely flavoured by a 24-hour sugar-soy bath, then quickly seared to hot and juicy

goodness. The pieces may have melted sublimely in the mouth, but at \$12 for little more than a modest stack, it wasn't enough. Unless they're sourced from an elite group of super-cows, give us more, please.

The Hawker Street Noodles (\$12) sounded too good to pass up, so we pounced on them: crispy chicken, prawn and squid wokked around with egg noodles, shoots of bok choy, soy and spicy *nam prik pao* (Thai chili paste) Delicious, but surpassed by the Filipino-style Humba Pork Bellies (\$14): This was the last dish of the night, and it arrived impressively as miniature Rubik's cubes of fatty bacon buffed by a star-anise-and-rice-wine braise, and made pretty by lily flowers and pickled green mango. There were so many other dishes deserving of our attention, but our gullets were only so wide and our stomachs only so fat.

As the menu at the Flying Tiger is focused on the more white-wine-friendly flavours of Asia, the list is balanced accordingly, with twice as many whites, rosés and sparkling wines as there are reds. There are 15 beers on offer, too, with a third of them sporting Asian labels like Kirin,

Singha and Tsingtao. There's plenty of sake, *shochu* (Japanese vodka) and plum wine to round out the hard stuff, plus a short list of original cocktails (\$8 each).

The service throughout was an attractive and earnest group effort; the two young women serving us also tended to everyone else. They were equally attentive to the point of pleasant redundancy.

This is the fourth restaurant in the growing Kits-based empire of industry mafiosos James Iranzad and Mark Durland (Nevermind, Hell's Kitchen, Abigail's Party). Food-wise, the Flying Tiger is somewhat of a leap for them, perhaps even a testament to their faith in a customer base increasingly resistant to the Gap-ification of the restaurant industry (not a whiff of corporate-chain ubiquity here). Without any masturbatory flourishes in the fare or decor, they've built a restaurant that will likely prove a solid addition to their roster. There's no attitude, just interesting eats. I just hope those who take the baton after Fineza's departure will be cut from a similar cloth. ☞