

Experience Serenade Hall

By TIMOTHY JAY IBAY



Simon Martin



different cultures are elegantly compressed into what is Serenade Hall. Sampling their chili finger filled with Mozzarella cheese,

Chef Fernan Punzalan fondly tells the story of how his journey towards refining Filipino cuisine started. “When I was still studying at The Culinary Institute of America in Napa Valley, San Francisco, California, there was an event called “World of Flavors” wherein chefs from different parts of the world are asked to showcase their cuisine for the entire week. When I looked at the list of countries being invited, I noticed the Philippines was not on it while other countries from Southeast Asia were (Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Singapore, India). Immediately, I asked my chef instructor about the absence of the Philippines....and he simply answered “Well, Philippine cuisine is still considered under the category of ‘cafeteria’. Your country is still young in the culinary world”. I agreed to a certain extent thinking that perhaps because of the collage of ethnicities and western influence, even most Filipinos can’t truly define what Filipino cuisine is. But though I saw his point, I was still much struck by the comment my mentor made because in my heart, I knew that Filipino dishes are one of the tastiest in the world. From then on even though I was still working for an American chain of restaurants, I started refining classic Filipino cuisine, putting a new dimension to it by adding a twist with the use of ingredients. And because I still had to work within the theme of their menu, I didn’t have a chance to introduce my fresh take on Filipino cuisine. So when we took over to manage Serenade Hall, I had the opportunity to fulfill my goal of introducing my refined Filipino cuisine...I call it Filipino traditional contemporary fusion.”

Fusion. It’s curious that Chef Fernan used that word to describe the cuisine he incorporated into Serenade Hall, because even upon entering the place, ‘fusion’ is what’s reflected by the aesthetics of the place. Varying displays and art decor from

I was quickly introduced to Chef’s fresh ‘twist’ to it. As it was served at our table, it appeared like a regular breaded American dish to me, but as I had a bite, a splash of American, Italian, and distinct Filipino combed through my taste buds. But the concept of ‘fusion’ doesn’t stop there. With the cozy sound of a grand piano in the background, an elegant atmosphere is established by Master Pianist, Simon Martin. And with DJ Slide’s (of 99.5 RT) melodic crooning, I expected a jazzy, lounge atmosphere for the rest of the dining experience. That was until I was introduced to another part of the Serenade Hall experience: “Pianoke”.

To be laconic, Pianoke is the unique experience of jamming songs with the live accompaniment from an 8-foot grand piano. As guests started performing on stage with Mr. Simon Martin, the elegance of Serenade Hall was quickly infused with the jovial atmosphere of a videoke bar while maintaining the class initially exuded by the place. Martin tells me that the feedback he gets from most guests who sing with his playing speaks of an ineffable experience. Singing on a quaint stage and under lights that mimic a center stage, I can see what makes it such an overwhelming experience. Another thing that adds to its uniqueness is the way Martin plays with the guests. He said that he studies a ton of songs from very different genres to allow jammers the liberty to display their vocal ostentations to almost any song they want; from Sinatra’s iconic pieces to Lady Gaga’s dance pop renderings, you get a choice from within a wide spectrum of music. Also, Martin speaks of a theory he’s developed during the course of Pianoke. He explains that he has to play along with the vocal capabilities of the jammers, not only for the cause of musicality, but also to let guests feel good about the way they sound.

Indeed, most of what is Serenade Hall breathes out ‘fusion’; from the kitchen to its aesthetics, to the mix of good old videoke fun with the ambiance of a jazzy lounge vibe, all of it lead to an experience that’s, quite honestly, peerless.