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TABLE
TALK

by Bob Lape



A PLACE FOR LOOSENING UP: Chakra, named for the yoga term for the body's focus of inner forces, is chock-full of energy, good looks and appealing food and drink.

Romantic spot close to the city

In Paramus, Chakra features new American with Asian accents; some letdowns

FINDING THE ambitious new restaurant Chakra is an adventure well worth the candle. Make an abrupt right turn from Route 4 East in Paramus into its valet-attended parking lot and discover exciting dining replete with scores of candles.

The place is built for romance and fun, with a low-lit water wall bathed in changing colors. Other walls of exposed, erose 120-year-old bricks are riddled with niches and crevices for large candles or Cambodian friezes.

Thin mesh metallic drapes separate roomy booths. The floor and tables of the \$3 million spread are teak. Banquettes are covered with velvet pillows and waiters extol merits of specialty cocktails called River of Grace, Rays of Light and Inner Worlds. The best-selling Fruit of Life, a blend of vodka, mango juice and mango liqueur, livens the proceedings nicely.

Michael Heiden, one of five Chakra partners, is the creative force behind Tantra, a celeb-filled sump-tuary in Miami Beach. Also a yoga

term, chakra is the body's focus for the inner forces of energy. The New Jersey eatery is chock-full of energy, good looks and appealing food and drink.

Chef Edward Lake's contemporary American cuisine with Asian accents is as imaginative and vivid as the setting. A cordial crew of servers sees to a casually clad, young-at-heart crowd, despite the business chic to which Chakra aspires. The restaurant is abuzz with the sound of people enjoying themselves.

Chef Lake's finesse shows after years as a Restaurant Associates' chef at the United Nations, cooking for many world leaders and three presidents. His small-plate starters (\$8 to \$16) can be world-class. Lightly seared, gingerbread-crust foie gras served with quince and currant confit is a taste triumph. He raises the bar on the often prosaic tempura shrimp by adding coconut in the batter, spicy mango vinaigrette and a crispy plantain garnish. No less than four species of wild mushrooms and caramelized onions go into a fine tart drizzled with porcini reduction.

On the other hand, lemon basil-accented calamari with roasted garlic aioli reads better than it turns out, emerging undercooked. Another good read—dumplings holding fried chicken and lemongrass—spends too long in the oil and is devoid of flavor.

There are salads either simple or complex, and half a dozen well-designed pasta choices.

Large-plate items are evenly divided between land and sea. The winter favorite, Moroccan braised lamb shank with superb lemon couscous, is a fall-from-the-bone winner. Port-braised short rib is perfumed with applewood-smoked bacon, and grilled Angus shell steak gets cipolini onions and aged balsamic sauce. Rich bordelaise robes a filet mignon whose coriander crust leads in a novel direction.

A splendid slab of grilled swordfish reposes amid butternut squash purée and honey mushrooms, with truffle-sorrel sauce harmonizing everything. Pan-seared diver scallops are agreeable paired with a salad of shaved fennel, arugula and citrus.

Chakra desserts show little Asian influence, hitting familiar bases with visual zest. Warm orange crepes are the showstopper. But molten chocolate cake is so-so, and unripe strawberries dim the appreciation of fondue in a chocolate tasting.

Jeffrey Leanhart, son of the late Steve Leanhart of Steve's Wortendyke Inn, is a manager of Chakra. He's growing an impressive wine roster and staging monthly wine dinners well worth trying.

Chakra's \$29 "sunset dinners" from 5 to 7 p.m. are a major value.

COMMENTS? cnyb@crain.com



CHAKRA

144 W. Route 4 East
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★★★½

CUISINE New American

WINES 500 choices, 18 by the glass

DRESS No code

NOISE LEVEL Prodigious

PRICE RANGE \$18-\$38

WINE MARKUP 100%-250%

CREDIT CARDS All major

RESERVATIONS Recommended

HOURS Lunch, Mon.-Fri., 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.; Dinner, Mon.-Wed., 5-10 p.m., Thurs.-Sat., 5-11 p.m., Sun., 5-9 p.m.; Sunset tasting menu, Mon.-Fri., 5-7 p.m., three courses, \$29

★★★★ = Outstanding
★★★ = Excellent
★★ = Very good
★ = Good