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Alex Di Suvero for The New York Times

Cendrillon, on Mercer Street in SoHo, serves Filipino dishes in a loftlike setting.

By **FRANK BRUNI**

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IN a city full of inquisitive diners ever eager for a change of pace, the Filipino restaurant Cendrillon should be attracting many more fans and much more interest than it does. It certainly shouldn't be only about one-sixth full, as it was during the first of the many recent times I dined there, or one-fifth full, as it was the third.

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Sure, summer can be cruel to restaurants, and, yes, Cendrillon is getting on in years. (It turns 10 this month.) Admittedly, there are a few too many unremarkable dishes on the menu, and the service can veer from poignantly attentive to epically absent-minded.

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But here's the thing, and it's no small thing: the food at Cendrillon doesn't taste like the food at other upscale Asian restaurants, because Cendrillon's chef and owner, Romy Dorotan, doesn't follow the dictates that more cautious restaurateurs do.

Cendrillon's SoHo location and vaguely hip, loftlike décor would seem to augur Asian food tailored for a broad audience, which often means potent gusts of sweetness, pointed blasts of heat, a deluge of coconut milk, a riot of peanuts.

But Cendrillon doesn't cook or act in predictable, populist, homogenized ways. It doesn't serve dishes that are merely anagrams of what's available a block or two in any direction. It makes choices that fly against the grain and leans on effects that are more intriguing than they are instantly appealing (and have a special merit for that reason).

Countless other restaurants serve duck as slices of breast so trimmed, tender and red they could almost be mistaken for beef. Cendrillon glories in the layers of fat and thick skin that make a duck a duck. It air-dries the bird, encases it in kosher salt, cooks it in the oven at very high heat and then chops it into crunchy nuggets that can - and should - be eaten with your hands.

Beyond that salty treat, Cendrillon favors sour notes, which it hits so hard and often that you experience a kind of taste revelation, realizing as never before just how far into the background of most cuisines these notes recede.

Cendrillon probably uses as much vinegar per ounce of food as any restaurant in Manhattan, and uses it perhaps most memorably in its chicken adobo. The chicken is braised in a mixture of rice vinegar, soy sauce, garlic and Thai chili pepper, and then bathed in a reduction of that liquid, paired with coconut milk.

But Mr. Dorotan employs restrained measures of the chili pepper and coconut milk, so that the tangy vinegar marches to the fore. The dish had a boldness that delighted me.

Adobo is a classic Filipino stew, just as sour notes are a hallmark of Filipino cooking. They are often achieved through vinegar and sometimes through the use of certain fruits, like kalamansi, a sort of Filipino lime, which gets a thorough workout at Cendrillon.

Kalamansi infuses a marinade for air-dried, jerky-like strips of meat in the beef tapa salad, another bracingly tangy treat. Kalamansi also infuses the marinade for the less appealing chicken inasal, essentially a barbecued chicken with most traces of sweetness eliminated.

Mr. Dorotan told me in a telephone interview that Cendrillon is more Filipino, with more authentic or slightly tweaked Filipino dishes, than it was when it opened in 1995. (The following year, it received one star from Ruth Reichl in The New York Times.) In the

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beginning, he said, he thought of it as a pan-Asian experiment. He gave it a distinctly non-Filipino name, a reference to a French ballet about Cinderella.

But, he said, his Filipino ancestry and the presence of Filipino flourishes on the menu prompted most writers to cast the restaurant in terms of Filipino cuisine, a mélange of Malaysian, Chinese and Spanish influences. So he nudged the restaurant farther in that direction over time.

The Filipino dishes at Cendrillon include, at brunch, the bibingka, a soufflé-like mixture of ground rice, eggs and coconut milk, which Mr. Dorotan tops with Gouda and feta cheese, albeit sparingly, so that no one effect trumps any other. The result is subtle, nuanced and a good example of Mr. Dorotan's refusal - either noble or stubborn, depending on your perspective - to pander to diners' expectations.

Another example, at dinner, is the oxtail kare-kare. It's a stew with tomatoes, ground peanuts and eggplant, among other ingredients, and many cooks would lean harder on those peanuts than Mr. Dorotan does. He uses them sparingly, because what's supposed to slap the dish to life - and does - is something less familiar and more challenging: a pungent fermented shrimp paste. Mr. Dorotan's one accommodation to timid diners is that he serves the paste on the side.

Cendrillon has plenty of mass-appeal dishes, most of them just fine: deep-fried pork and shrimp spring rolls; a platter of smoked spare ribs; a lamb shank braised in coconut milk; pad Thai with grilled squid instead of the usual shrimp. It has disappointments, most notably the squash soup with crab dumplings, a feat of near-flavorlessness.

But at prices extremely reasonable for its high-rent neighborhood, Cendrillon showcases ingredients that you don't encounter every other day at every other restaurant, like purple yam, which appears in a dessert tart and in an ice cream, and young coconut, which is used in a fantastic pie and in a gentle juice served at brunch.

Cendrillon brushes mustard and miso across a fillet of fish but doesn't stop there. That coating, over striped bass, is the glue for a second, more exotic skin: a mixture of leeks and hijiki.

Cendrillon may not be easy or sexy. But it's daring, different and a sure remedy for the malady, too widespread these days, of dining déjà vu. That has to matter, and that gives food lovers a real investment in the survival of this unconventional place.

## **Cendrillon**

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45 Mercer Street (Broome Street), SoHo; (212) 343-9012.

**ATMOSPHERE** A deep, narrow room with a partially open kitchen, wood booths, exposed brick, funky lighting fixtures and a casually hip, loftlike appeal.

**SOUND LEVEL** Restaurant was too empty during visits for a clear determination.

**RECOMMENDED DISHES** Bibingka; goat curry; beef tapa salad; chicken adobo; duck; oxtail kare-kare; young coconut pie; blueberry and purple yam tart.

**WINE LIST** International and affordable but not especially interesting. More intriguing is the long list of imported teas.

**PRICE RANGE** Brunch and lunch appetizers and snacks, \$6 to \$8; entrees and noodle dishes, \$10.50 to \$14.50. Dinner appetizers, \$8 to \$10.50; main courses and noodle dishes, \$15.50 to \$20.50; desserts, \$7 to \$8.

**HOURS** 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday and Tuesday through Thursday; to 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Closed Mondays.

**RESERVATIONS** Usually possible for the same day.

**CREDIT CARDS** All major cards.

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS** Short ramp to front door; accessible restroom on same level as dining room.

**WHAT THE STARS MEAN:**

(None) Poor to satisfactory

\* Good

\*\* Very good

\*\*\* Excellent

\*\*\*\* Extraordinary

Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction to food ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

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