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# Island Underground

Subterra spices thing up with dinner series

**By Mark Stock**



It seemed natural for Martin and Janet Bleck, curating a multi-course meal showcasing Caribbean cuisine, a short sail away from south Florida, where they spent a good portion of their careers.

The meal, part of a winter Wednesday dinner series at Subterra in Newberg, featured the tropical flavors of this equatorial region, incorporating conch, plantains, coconut and mango. Mild as the winter has been, “A Night in the Caribbean” had the effect of a tiki bar without the kitsch, offering diners a memorable meal and some armchair travel to teal waters and palm-studded islands.

Drawn like so many to Oregon’s beauty and food and wine prestige, the Blecks started Subterra in 2010. The unassuming restaurant is situated underground (hence the name) in north Newberg, a stone’s throw from countless Willamette Valley vineyards and wineries. In many ways, the place feels like a wine cellar, somewhat cavernous but brightened by wall-

to-wall murals and lots of homey yellows and browns. The restaurant is open daily, and, presently, the kitchen is being shared by the Blecks other project: The Rogue Gourmet Catering Company.

The meal itself was relaxed and unpretentious, the kind of fare and feel you'd expect after a bit of rum and some time on the beach. Expectedly, some of it was finger food, like the Jamaican jerk chicken wings and the calamari with jalapeños, capers and lemon slices. The conch and vegetable chowder really stood out, a tropical take on gumbo. Conch, a large sea snail known for its large and elaborate shells, is often downgraded as the "poor man's scallop." Yet, the clam-like flavor of the meat is fantastic and paired swimmingly with the tomato-based chowder.

It was somewhat surprising to hear about Chef Martin Bleck's distaste for mango, a fruit that featured prominently in the next dish. He offered an anecdote about once mowing the lawn in Florida and dicing up some rotten fallen mangoes in the process. The smell, he said, haunted him. The mango salsa was a great addition to the baby back ribs, laced with a pineapple-passion fruit glaze. In fact, it could be stirred in with just about everything, from the Caribbean coconut rice and peas to the vegetable stir fry. The brightness of the mango elevated the ground-level earthiness of the vegetables.

At \$34 each (not including drinks), the winter dinner series is quite reasonable. Being at Subterra feels very much like dining at the Blecks' home, and the couple made the rounds before and after each course, revealing some of the recipes or chatting about a recent wine country development. The five-year-old restaurant boasts the inviting spirit the area's cellars and tasting rooms are known for. This is not a Thomas Keller attempt at Michelin stars. Instead, Subterra aims to impress without overdoing it, a European-minded restaurant that capitalizes on the fertile valley it's nestled in as well as the many years of culinary experience the Blecks share.

Wines poured during the Caribbean-themed meal seemed almost foreign on a night devoted to sun-soaked foods. The "libation of the evening," as the restaurant called it, was labeled "pum runch," a high octane rum punch that could twist the pronunciation of just about anything after more than a few. Rum is a mainstay in Caribbean culture, its toasted sweetness

immediately reminiscent of warm ocean water and wandering barefoot.

The finale of “A Night in the Caribbean” arrived in the form of three-milks cake, a central American-by-way-of-Spain dessert more commonly called “tres leches.” Martin remarked on the complexity of the dish, consisting of evaporated milk, sweetened condensed milk and heavy cream. The dessert manages the contradictory makeup of being both light and weighty. There’s a finesse about it, especially in its wet structure, but the flavor is full and rich, demanding a hot cup of black coffee.

Subterra’s winter Wednesday dinner series began in mid-January with an Italian flair and went on to include the eats of Eastern Europe, New Orleans, France and Germany, among others. As I write this, the Blecks are preparing for the final evening of the series, a timely and self-explanatory night titled “The Luck of the Irish.” Thus far, many of the nights have sold out, unsurprising given the eclectic lineup and relatively small capacity of the restaurant.

By the end of the night, the Blecks were offering their thanks to the small crowd of diners and taking questions. Most of the inquiries involved recipes, which the chef partly handed over. Regarding the wings, Bleck admitted a lengthy marinade, including soy sauce and store-bought jerk sauce from World Market. It was an honest response that captured the mid-brown nature of Subterra, at once hunting for quality without putting the showy blinders on.

