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Miami-Dade College's Tuyo a place of higher dining

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MARICE COHN BAND / MIAMI HERALD File

Downtown Miami: Tuyo's expansive view includes the Freedom Tower, right.

Tuyo, "yours" in Spanish, is a smart addition to the Miami dining scene.

Set atop Miami Dade College's new Miami Culinary Institute, the eighth-floor restaurant is surprising in its quirky elegance and breathtaking in its panoramic views. With only 80 seats arranged around floor-to-ceiling windows and a glass-enclosed fireplace, it feels very modern with its wavy molded ceilings and recycled wood floors.

Though located in a school, the staff is all-pro, headed by Norman Van Aken, a culinary force in South Florida for more than three decades who has recruited some of

his finest protégés including Jeffrey Brana and pastry chef Max Santiago. Van Aken makes it his mission to influence diners and students alike, and his lengthy menus loaded with literary references require more citations than a college thesis.

Still in his first semester (Tuyo opened in November and changes its menu monthly), Van Aken is combining nostalgic plates from his early days such as Curaçao and foie gras-topped brioche French toast with Asian-inspired simplicity such as local cobia ceviche with papaya and pickled cucumbers.

Those who have the time and treasure should indulge in the five-course-tasting menu (\$95, \$155 with wine pairings). We ordered a la carte, finding lots of amazing multiethnic flavors along the way.

Though I am not usually a huge bread fan, I could not resist the perfectly crusty, gently chewy and slightly oily ciabatta squares powdered with flour. They are served with a fruity young olive oil and a pat of salty butter that are equally irresistible.

On one visit, the amuse bouche was a hearty Brazilian fritter stuffed with crabmeat. On another, it was a pristinely assembled crouton balanced atop a half sungold tomato the size of a marble with a thimbleful of minced ham salad.

Next we were beguiled by a Joel Robuchon tuna tartare mixed with bits of tomato diced so small they might have been pepper flakes. A gently coddled egg on top provides the rich

sauce to balance the fresh fish, with a scattering of matchstick-fried potatoes lending the crunch and salt.

An enticing conch chowder, a sunny concoction of saffron-touched cream with a puff of coconut foam, bits of orange and nuggets of cracked conch, is reason enough to dine here. These are the flavors of Miami.

So, too, a classic Van Aken creation, the "rhum" and pepper-painted tilefish served on mango habanero mojo with a slightly sweet plantain mash given a gently kick from roasted poblano chiles.

Another simple fish dish is the perfectly pan-seared yellowtail snapper fillet on a rich and buttery bed of mashed potatoes kissed by grapefruity beurre blanc and plated with meaty, sautéed malabar spinach for an earthy touch.

A beef duo of strip steak and short rib is cooked precisely, but the sauces (ají amarillo and a clunky olive vinaigrette) didn't make the grade. An overworked pompano also failed to inspire.

On the service front, we encountered one waiter who lacked a grasp of both English and the menu, and with a kitchen one floor down, dishes can be delayed.

The wine list encompasses fine Old and New World choices, and all were well stored and poured, with a \$7 glass of Cote du Rhone a bargain find.

The exceptionally creative Santiago's desserts include insanely good hot donuts stuffed with not-too-sweet dulce de leche and served with a dark chocolate dipping sauce and macadamia brittle ice cream.

Tangy yogurt panna cotta is like spring in a cereal bowl, and dehydrated fruits are used to incredible advantage in dishes like Santiago's piña colada of tissue-thin pineapple and crunchy coconut meat with a chilled soup and a pouf of coconut sorbet. His one-dimensional deconstructed chocolate "soufflé" was the only disappointment.

A cheese cart with more than a dozen well-stored and displayed specimens served with and lovely accompaniments is a welcome addition in this informal town.

Does downtown Miami need a pricey haute dining room with heady plates and lofty ideals? I wasn't sure until I sat in for a few sessions at this unique and excellent new institute of higher dining.