

eating out

Sparks flying

Creativity arrives at the Museum Hotel. By David Burton.

WITH such a wealth of good restaurants at their disposal, no wonder it no longer occurs to Wellingtonians to go to a hotel for a special meal.

Hotel food in New Zealand is struck with a reputation for being old-fashioned and vaguely institutional. There is the feeling that, if not exactly mediocre, hotel cuisine is certainly unadventurous, following trends rather than creating them.

However, with Steve Morris at the Bolton Hotel, Sarah Ghinella at the Holiday Inn and now Laurent Loudeac at the Museum Hotel, suddenly the sparks of creativity are flying, hopefully in the process lightening up those ultra-conscious, middle-of-the-road, all-smothering hotel chain bureaucracies.

I hadn't formally dined at the Museum Hotel for 10 years till last Christmas, when I semi-gatecrashed its seasonal bash. After being greeted at the door with champagne and a toothpick of fresh tuna sashimi, ribboned with a strip of water-thin ginger, skewered with sweet-sour-hot wasabi soy gel, my friend Marco was so enraptured that he spent the rest of the night hunting them down. So we were honour-bound to visit the restaurant with our wives and see what else Laurent

nitty gritty

MUSEUM HOTEL

90 Cable St

Phone (04) 802 8900

Open for dinner 7 nights

Fully licensed

Price range of mains: \$28-\$35

Food: ★★★★★

Ambiance: ★★★★★

Service: ★★★★★

Wine list: ★★★★★

Cost: \$133 for two (excluding wine)

Loudeac, late of Hummingbird, could do.

In contrast to the stark architecture of the Museum Hotel, there's been a lovely plush, classical overlay over the ground floor reception rooms and lobby. The walls now hold a significant collection of contemporary art: there's a Nigel Brown, a Brent Wong and a shrine to the hui'a by my dear sister Sally Burton.

Wellingtonian guests are brought back to earth by two paintings that flank the entrance to the hotel restaurant — near full-length portraits, front and rear, of the late, tragic, Willis St derro with shorts and a bucket, who had a fatal bulge bal-



A dining room refit has provided massive rows of layered voile curtains, which soften the modernist interior. Picture: ROSS GIBLIN

loonig from his head. A recent dining room refit has provided massive rows of layered voile curtains, red on green, which soften and feminise the sharp angles of the modernist interior.

My wife commented on a certain wait for our food, though we all "unmed" and "saahed" over it when it came. The worry was that if they took that long to produce four entrees, what would it be like when they were busy — a pertinent point, given that for the entire Saturday evening we were the only people in the 60-odd seater dining room. We rather enjoyed the private dining room effect, because we could

talk openly and laugh to our hearts' content, but I did fear for the sustainability of such a work-intensive repertoire.

While an overly light hand with certain foams and reductions might have failed to totally fulfil every promise, every dish sounded so enticing I wanted to order the entire menu at once. The flavour and texture combinations are unashamedly recherche, and fully justify the fine dining prices.

An \$18.50 entree, Beef Cheek Tortellini, came on caramelised onions with white bean foam, truffle oil and mushroom fricassee.

At \$29, the Crayfish Risotto was one of the cheapest mains on the menu. I ordered it, because a 25-minute preparation time was specified. When it arrived, its al dente texture spoke of a risotto prepared from scratch from a tasty crayfish stock, and finished with clams and a Pernod saffron reduction.

A Lamb Tasting Plate teased us with various parts of the anatomy done three ways — roasted lamb rack, braised shank cannelloni, and crispy lambs brain — mounted on a carved roast potato plinth.

The wine list is suitably posh, and while our waiter wore canvas shoes and didn't seem to be around when our water glasses needed refilling, he was at least intimately acquainted with the menu. Best of all, these meals were cooked by underlings in the kitchen on a night when Loudeac was absent.