

MASS AVE'S NEWEST DINING HOTSPOT

# Indianapolis

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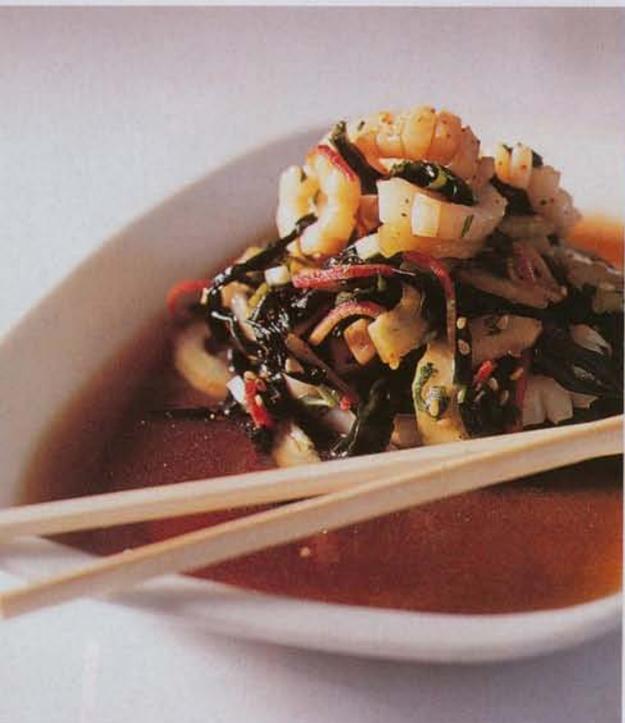
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# Real Simple

Pure flavors and California style harmonize at Elements. **BY JODI WRIGHT**



**ASIAN FLAIR** Elements borrows flavors from Japanese cuisine for dishes such as the calamari salad with seaweed, cucumber and soy dressing.

Sadly, while Hoosierland is one of the last places in the country to pick up a fashion trend, it's the first to pick up a new chain restaurant. Case in point: Cheeseburger in Paradise. The corporate-created Jimmy Buffett homage chose Indy as its launching point, and for good reason: Corporate eateries know we're especially susceptible to outsiders with catchy themes, and we don't seem to care whether decent food backs up the concept.

But wait, say restaurant owners Michael Sylvia and Greg Hardesty. If you venture to downtown's Massachusetts Avenue, where the pair recently opened their contemporary-styled Elements, you'll find a cosmopolitan enclave of boutiques,

theaters, galleries and eateries that make up an arty, big-city streetscape blissfully lacking in corporate outposts (okay, there *is* a Starbucks, but not even Ivory Soap is 100 percent pure).

Such an independent-minded strip is a fitting venue for Elements, a restaurant where substance matches style and a subdued setting allows the food to take center stage. The lineup of inventive dishes changes constantly: One week it's braised lamb shank with pearl barley risotto, and the next, yellowtail carpaccio with jalapeño-wasabi sauce or monkfish tail with sweet-carrot puree, applewood-smoked bacon and whole-grain mustard sauce. Chef Hardesty's succinct, innovative menu melds the seasonal emphasis of French cuisine and the Asian

sensibilities of California cooking. Reflecting the West Coast affinity for Pacific flavors, dishes feature Japanese ingredients such as seaweed, ginger, soy and miso.

Asian ingredients are familiar to Sylvia and Hardesty, who made waves in 2000 with the opening of their Broad Ripple darling, H<sub>2</sub>O Sushi. That restaurant's puckish energy and cool interior—with a concrete floor and blond wood furnishings—won us over as much as the sushi itself, and we joined the crowds lining up for rolls christened with names like *Spicy Tush*, *Sleeping Alone* and *Joe Pesci* (spicy shrimp, of course). The new venture is much more low-key, with none of its predecessor's cheeky sensibility. Elements' interior is warmer, too, with surfaces painted pumpkin, terra



**S'MORE, PLEASE** Amid warm environs, diners bask in the pleasure of tender duck with cherry sauce and the S'more tart, combining the classic fireside flavors with caramel and candied peanuts.

cotta, spruce and russet, and sconces shaped like oversized origami sculptures. Often in small dining rooms, you feel like you're on display, as if the staff were taking note of your every bite and sip. But though the new restaurant's space is narrow, you don't feel like an exhibit on 21st-century American dining habits.

In hindsight, it feels as if H<sub>2</sub>O were just a warm-up for Elements, where Hardesty can express more creativity in the menu (after all, there is only so much you can do with sushi) and more fully draw on his training at such California hot spots as Rubicon. The chef's culinary ethos favors uncomplicated preparations with minimal manipulation. "I don't want 700 things on the plate," he says. "And I don't do heavy marinades or nut crusts." Instead, he lets flavors speak for themselves, as in the Maple Leaf Farms duck: The naturally salty breast meat was the most tender we've had, and the accompanying dried-cherry sauce was light and tart. Similarly, the oven-roasted salmon was seasoned with only salt and pepper and rests in a shallow bath of dashi broth embellished with enoki mushrooms and edamame.

Preparation and presentation may be spare, but there remains a fetching



E. ANTHONY VALANIS



fussiness to the precisely controlled cuisine. The spicy, bittersweet radish salad includes heirloom roots—in black, watermelon, daikon and lime-citrus varieties—uniformly shaved and tossed with Stilton, fat walnuts and a perfect matchstick julienne of green apple. Such arrangements are a bit uptight, but impress without being too theatrical.

We've heard a few grumblings here and there regarding Elements' portion sizes, but though entrees are not presented in steakhouse-worthy servings, you won't go away hungry. Portions are purposely modest, allowing diners to sample a number of dishes without feeling stuffed. There are too few chefs like Hardesty and Steven Oakley of Oakleys Bistro who have

enough respect for their craft—and their customers—to refrain from overloading plates with gargantuan hunks of meat and piles of potatoes. Yes, we admit to wanting about twice as much lobster risotto as the fist-size mound we received, but there's something to be said for leaving the people wanting more—one more pink slice of flank steak steeped in garlic miso broth, one more bite of chilled calamari salad made with seaweed and tender, scored tentacles in a dressing of soy sauce, rice vinegar, mirin and pungent bonito.

Sous chef and pastry chef Nicole Ankney's lovely desserts are reason enough to make a reservation, and they match the rest of the menu's simple flavors and seasonal ingredients. The dense,

crumbly financier cake may arrive at the table with figs or pears and a diminutive dollop of pepper-flavored ice cream, maple-pecan oatmeal cookies come with a cup of espresso-flavored whipped cream, and the warm banana split is sprinkled with pecans and drizzled with Indiana shagbark hickory syrup. Our favorite H<sub>2</sub>O dessert also joins the finale lineup: creme brulee generously dotted with tiny vanilla beans.

Elements has nicely settled into the Mass Ave dining landscape. The neighborhood boasts veteran establishments Aesop's Tables, Agio and Bazbeaux Pizza alongside the relative newcomers: Last year's hot spot, Scholars Inn, draws thirsty theater crowds; Yats serves up sumptuous, sloppy Cajun stew; at R Bistro, owner and executive chef Regina Mehallick riffs on Euro comfort food. And now, to round out the mix, Elements gives us a focused menu of straightforward yet refined preparations. Hardesty's aesthetic represents an almost puritanical pursuit of ingredient flavors, and such zeal is catching. ■

## ELEMENTS

**Location** 415 N. Alabama Street

**Phone** 634-8888

**Hours** Lunch Monday through Friday 11 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.; dinner Tuesday through Thursday 5 to 10:30 p.m., Friday and Saturday 5 to 11 p.m.

**Cuisine** French-influenced, contemporary American

**Prices** Salads and appetizers \$6-\$11; entrees \$16-\$22, desserts \$6-\$9

**Atmosphere** Drenched in autumnal tones, the small, contemporary dining room is filled with foodies young and old.

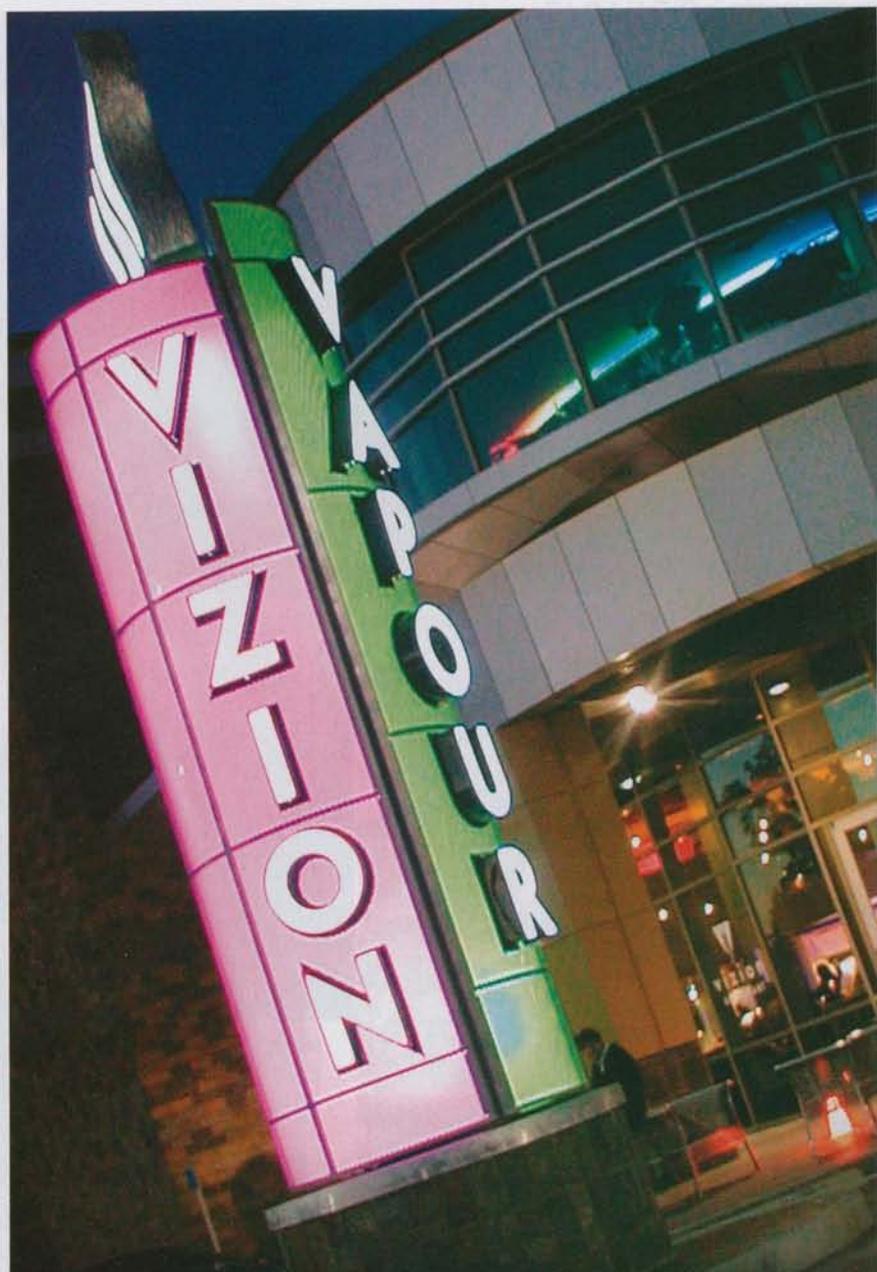
**Pedigree** Proprietors Michael Sylvia and Greg Hardesty also own H<sub>2</sub>O Sushi. Chef Hardesty spent time in California kitchens (Pinot, Rubicon) as well as the local Glass Chimney, while sous chef Nicole Ankney previously worked at Something Different.

**Service** Cheerful, efficient, unobtrusive

**Recommended** Duck breast with dried-cherry sauce, sole in lemon-butter sauce, oven-roasted salmon in dashi broth, flank steak, financier cake

**Vegetarian entrees** The seasonally changing dinner menu includes at least one veggie entree, such as seared tofu with bok choy and shiitake mushrooms

**If you like this place, try** Five Spice Cafe, H<sub>2</sub>O Sushi, Oakleys Bistro



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