



**Chef Pascal Turgeon and co-owner Erika Soleilhac work well together to make diners feel welcome at Tandem.**

**Photograph by: Allen McInnis, THE GAZETTE**

**Tandem**

*Two and one half stars*

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586 Villeray St. (At St. Gérard St.)

Phone: 514-277-3339

Website: [www.restauranttandem.ca](http://www.restauranttandem.ca)

Open: Tuesday to Saturday 5:30 to 11 p.m.

Wheelchair access: No

Reservations: Essential

Cards: Major cards and Interac

Vegetarian friendly: Not especially

Parking: On surrounding streets

Price range: Three-course table d'hôte \$27-\$42, desserts \$6-\$9.

Remember that line from the movie *Forrest Gump*? “Mama always said life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get.” Okay, pardon me for being cheesy, but those words ricochet through my brain whenever I judge a restaurant too quickly.

Montreal seems to have cornered the market on the 40-seat, chef-owned neighbourhood bistro. I cannot deny that when reviewing many such restaurants, the write-ups could almost be interchangeable.

But then there’s that restaurant that throws you for a loop. Case in point: Tandem, a 5-month-old, bring-your-own-wine restaurant that I was feeling skeptical about from the get-go. Located in the fabulously funky up-and-coming neighbourhood that is Villeray, this establishment is but a stone’s throw from one of my faves, Tapeo. No surprise, Tandem’s chef and co-owner Pascal Turgeon last worked at Tapeo.

The restaurant’s set-up includes 36 seats inside and about 10 outside. There’s the classic bistro blackboard listing the daily specials, the semi-open kitchen, the paper-topped tables, the wooden bistro chairs, the predictable French menu – I’ve been to dozens of restaurants like this.

But then along comes something different in the form of the lovely Erika Soleilhac. The co-owner (with chef Turgeon, whom she describes as her “conjoint”), Soleilhac is a stunning woman with chic, short black hair, and a husky-voiced French accent. She’s warm and friendly, and Turgeon is a good cook. Once I bit into this chocolate of a restaurant, which at first looked like so many others, I realized it was one of the best in the box.

The menu includes a soup or salad and appetizer in the price of the main course. There are a few added costs for the starters, but they are definitely worth it. A full dinner for three set me back \$175 – a fair price that explains the never-ending draw of bring-your-own-wine restos. Soleilhac supplied an ice bucket in the form of a snazzy orange plastic shopping bag and even poured our wine a few times, which rarely happens in BYOB establishments.

When the first plates hit the table, I looked over and saw a crisp salad, lightly dressed and served on pretty square plates. There's no denying there's a lot of love and attention going into this food.

That simple salad was indeed a hit, but the gazpacho was even better. Served in a deep bowl, the thick soup consisted of tiny cubes of tomato, pepper and cucumber. Not too spicy nor too runny, this cold and consistent soup provided a great first taste of summer. I could have guzzled a bucket of the stuff.

The next round of starters included salmon tartare, grilled calamari and garlic-soused shrimp. Made of both raw and smoked salmon, the timbale of tartare was paired with a green parsley purée and a not-so-flavourful white purée that I'm guessing was daikon. I liked the fact that the fish was cut into big chunks, but I found the over-all oiliness of the dish a little off-putting.

I was also a bit down on the calamari at first, because the seafood, though tender, was tasteless. But then I scooped up some of the fantastically smoky and crunchy chorizo/almond salsa served alongside, paired it with forkfuls of the squid and enjoyed every bite.

And finally came the shrimp: four specimens, lightly seared, scrumptious and bathed in garlic butter. Though potent enough to ward off a busload of vampires, this butter provided great dipping sauce for the thick slices of baguette.

The starters reminded me of the tapas plates served up the street at Tapeo, yet the main courses were more French in style. When taking our order, Soleilhac highly recommended the rack of lamb, while I hemmed and hawed over the duck magret à l'orange. I eventually settled on her suggestion, but was a bit disappointed to find the lamb more on the well-done than rare side. The portion was generous, though, and the accompanying potato galette, pattypan squash and sliced peppers paired beautifully with the Domaine de la Vieille Julienne Côtes du Rhône I brought along. The wine also proved a good match for a dish featuring a toothsome filet of Boileau deer, served with a silky potato purée and grilled yellow peppers.

To sample something completely different, we opted for the linguine with spinach, goat's cheese and walnuts bathed in a creamy sauce spiked with vermouth. It's funny how that dish description reads as cloying when in fact it was very light, with the nuts adding great texture amid all the slippery noodles and cheese.

Desserts are kept simple at Tandem. The best we tasted was the trio of crème brûlées, which includes one with vanilla, another with lime and a third flavoured with rosemary. Sure, crème brûlée trios are so 15 years ago, but this version was delicious and well done, as was a little soft chocolate cake served with red berry coulis. Alas, it can't all be perfect: the tarte Tatin was over-caramelized (and thus bitter) and assembled on a gummy crust.

Between the main courses and desserts, I asked Soleilhac about the cheese course. She apologized and said there wasn't any cheese available, but then returned to the table with a scrumptious croustillant de chèvre (goat's cheese baked in phyllo pastry) that we gobbled down in seconds.

It's that kind of attention to making dinner as pleasant as possible that won me over here. When desserts were polished off, Turgeon made the rounds of the dining room, chatting with customers, asking how we had heard of the restaurant. There's real energy and warmth to this establishment. And I so like this couple, the way they work together.

So welcome to the scene, Tandem. I can't think of a better name for your restaurant.

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