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## Leo showcases the smart flavors of a first-time chef in Annapolis

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Our server lights up when I place an order for a vicious predator with a big mouth and shiny teeth.

“The chef says it’s the ethos of the whole restaurant,” the waiter at the freshly minted Leo in Annapolis says after I tell him I want to try snakehead. “It’s delicious and nutritious, and you’re helping the Department of Natural Resources out,” since snakehead is an invasive species.

The server gushes like a fire hose, but I appreciate his enthusiasm. He makes me feel as if I’ve done some good before I’ve had so much as a bite of the menu from Matthew Lego, who’s making his kitchen debut at Leo, launched in March by Brian and Hilarey Leonard. Heretofore known for their bars in the District, the couple, who relocated to Maryland’s capital in 2019, own Lost & Found in Shaw and Free State in Chinatown.

Leo, in the Uptown Arts District, is the owners’ response to all the nearby places that offer crab cakes — the expected — as well as a salute to the community they now call home. Local pride beams from a dining room door, painted with the names of more than a dozen producers used by the restaurant (formerly Dangerously Delicious Pies). A stack of booster seats near the entrance is basically a welcome mat for parents with kids in tow, although the vibe here is one of relaxed sophistication. “Stay Awhile” encourages a neon sign, bordered by plants, on the wall in back, where the convivial bar runs parallel to a series of tall tables. (“We’re bar people,” says Hilarey of the abundant high seating.) Even from the rear, diners can catch the show of passersby, thanks to broad front windows

Born in Frederick and raised in Westminster, both in Carroll County, the chef, 33, says he drew on food memories and dishes “locals could recognize” to create the menu. So there’s something fishy to settle in with, including smoked salmon mousse, sprinkled with Old Bay and ringed in emerald oil (from parsley and chives). The spread is accompanied by saltines brushed with brown butter and so good, you’re tempted to devour them sans their pink spread. Oysters, plump and hot, make an appearance, too. Their crackling cover is what happens when ramp butter and gremolata spend a moment under the broiler. Chicken wings get crisp with the help of seasoned cornstarch and two dips in hot oil; grits are formed into fingers, fried, and best dispatched with

the hot-sauced aioli on their plate. Notice the varying crunch as you munch? Lego says he uses multiple grinds of dried corn, “the finest and the largest,” to produce the snack.

Half the restaurants in Washington could learn a lesson from my first server at Leo. “Would you like things coursed out?” he asks after confirming our order. It might sound obvious — appetizers before entrees, with time in between — but too many places opt to send dishes out for the convenience of the chef rather than the customer, resulting in unwelcome pileups on tables. No such problem exists at Leo, where the chicken never crosses the road before a soup or salad and Hilarey fills the room with sunshine as she navigates the 60-seat interior. The boss, who also wrote the descriptive wine list, sets the right tone. (She and Brian, the parents of a 3-year-old, take turns watching over the space.)

Maybe you want a sandwich. Porchetta between slices of brioche delivers. “Very rich,” a server tells you. Very true, the taste buds confirm. The crisp-fatty roasted pork is seasoned with parsley, lemon zest and Old Bay — “the key to everything,” says the chef of the spice blend — and plied with creamy white “Baltimore” tiger sauce that will taste familiar to fans of the area pit beef sandwich stands. (The slick is Duke’s mayo mixed with sour cream and horseradish.) A thatch of skin-on french fries adds to the fun. On the lighter side, there’s a soothing risotto, streaked green with the same herbed oil that graces the salmon mousse and bulked up with shiitake and oyster mushrooms. The chef likes color. His tasty pan-seared, oven-finished chicken breast arrives with crisp pea shoots, dots of scallion aioli and a carrot puree so vivid, I’m tempted to pull out sunglasses.

The snakehead is as advertised: delicious — also firm, flaky and hinting of mushrooms on the palate. Why don’t more chefs offer the plentiful local catch? “It’s not a pretty fish,” says Lego, who does his best to fight any preconceived notions customers might have by offering a roasted fillet with sauteed greens and a classic red butter sauce.

The flavor and consistency of the food might surprise anyone looking into the chef’s résumé. While Lego grew up interested in, and appreciative of, good cooking, he went to school to study advertising and public relations and last worked at the Cato Institute, the libertarian think tank in Washington. While there, he became a regular at the nearby Lost & Found and grew so enamored of the watering hole, he asked the Leonards if he could work for them. They responded by offering him a gig as a bartender at Free State, where he eventually mixed drinks full time. When the pandemic initially shuttered places, Lego took 150 pounds of leftover citrus home and turned it into preserved lemons, dehydrated lime wheels, marmalade and a riff on limoncello using grapefruit. His passion was such that the owners promoted him to manager at Free State, inviting him to take charge of the kitchen at Leo as they plotted its birth. Ahead of opening, Lego apprenticed at the innovative Foraged in Baltimore.

The principals tapped Washington chef Matt Adler, the vision behind the popular Caruso’s Grocery in the District and Rockville, as a consultant. Lego recalls the pro’s prized advice: perseverance. “Even the toughest days come to an end,” Lego was told.

The chef grew up eating his mother’s and grandmother’s angel food cake, a tender memory he revives at Leo, with strawberry compote, whipped cream and a twist: The maternal figures in his

life never branded their slices with stripes from the griddle. There's bread pudding, too, spiced to please with nutmeg and cinnamon and offered with a scoop of vanilla ice cream, striped with honey, from the local Always Ice Cream Company.

You can probably guess what I'm going to type next. Leo isn't for the faint of hearing. Dining on the early side or snaring one of the four tables out front are the only alternatives to the clamor as the night thrums on. For some of us, though, the arrival of a fresh face in Annapolis outweighs having to speak up. Plus, snakehead, people!

Owners Brian and Hilarey Leonard at Leo, where the circle designs were created by local artist Kimberly George. (Scott Suchman/for The Washington Post)

### **Leo**

212 West St., Annapolis. 443-782-7549. [leoannapolis.com](http://leoannapolis.com). Open for indoor and (limited) outdoor dining and takeout 4 to 10 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday for dinner and 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Prices: dinner appetizers \$8 to \$16, main courses \$18 to \$32 Sound check: 81 decibels/Extremely loud. Accessibility: No barriers to entry; ADA-compliant restroom.