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SEPTEMBER 2019

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FIRST TASTE

Destination: Wellness

In a world of superfoods and blissed-out sweat fests, it only makes sense that a celebrity chef, Spike Mendelsohn, opens a restaurant, Vim & Victor, inside an upscale gym.

BY STEFANIE GANS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY REY LOPEZ



Made for the 'Gram

Thank pitaya (aka dragon fruit) for the bright pink hue of this smoothie bowl.

THE MAX FROM *SAVED BY THE BELL*. Central Perk from *Friends*. Pop's Diner from *Riverdale*. The famous "third" place: not home, not work or school, but somewhere else. Somewhere to tuck into for a quick bite, a coffee, a milkshake, a drink. Somewhere to sit, watch TV, clang mugs after a rec soccer game. These spots are cafes or diners, maybe for some, a hotel lobby.

But what if you could get cozy inside of a gym, already that spot away from home, away from the rush of the day? What if there were avocado toasts and "wellness" lattes with turmeric, maple syrup, black pepper and, for three more dollars, a shot of espresso? It's lovely and silky, a little earthy, a reminder this is sup-

posed to be good for you, but also it's just good.

Captive dining situations—food inside of a mall, food inside of a grocery store—have been one of the biggest beneficiaries of the good-food-everywhere boom. It only makes sense for a full-scale restaurant to exist inside of the gargantuan, showy gym that is The St. James in Springfield.

On a Monday night, Spike Mendelsohn, holding a green smoothie in a plastic to-go cup, walks through Vim & Victor. He's wearing a T-shirt. He fits into the scene here, teammates unchanged from a game, munching on sweet potato fries, sipping on golden beers. Mendelsohn found fame on an early season of *Top Chef*, he capitalized on his persona and boyish grin and opened



Top Down

From fame on *Top Chef* to building a brand with burgers, pizza, CBD drinks and turmeric lattes (right), Spike Mendelsohn (above) has his footprint everywhere, including serving whole branzino (left) at a restaurant (top) inside of a high-end gym.

a pizza joint (We the Pizza) and a burger place (Good Stuff Eatery), among other concepts.

Mendelsohn isn't all about the grease. His out-of-the-kitchen projects focus on food advocacy (DC Central Kitchen, World Wildlife Fund). His entrepreneurial streak includes PLNT, described as a "wellness drink made to inspire moments of clarity and curiosity" that's "CBD-infused plant water intended to nourish a balanced mood and a healthy stress response ... crafted to synergistically work with CBD to activate wellness in your gut, mind and body."

In other words, wellness lattes match Mendelsohn and the clientele at this high-end sports complex.

Vim & Victor's menu diverges into two camps: "I worked out, I deserve a treat," or "I worked out, I want a pitaya smoothie bowl."

The latter of which is hot pink dragon fruit, icy and smooth, decorated with cut fruit, cacao nib granola and coconut shavings. It's not as rich as an acai bowl, which feels like ice cream for lunch, this is more like a sorbet for a meal.

For the former, there are fried chicken wings slathered in liquefied blue cheese with roasted slices of celery and red onion. It's a bold move, considering blue cheese's divisiveness. Plus, after the kitchen works so hard to make a perfectly good fried chicken, why does it then cover it in sauce, thereby losing the aforementioned crisp? Still, it works.

Some items split the middle: potato skins using sweet potato over rus-



sets, Greek yogurt instead of sour cream, plus shaved Brussels sprouts and—Mendelsohn isn't a monster—bacon. Some spuds were cooked through, others not, with some toppings omitted, and the overall impression of an afterthought.

More thoughtful was the whole branzino, an elegant dish signaling to forget the guest at the next table wears mesh shorts and sneakers and down the hall are at least a hundred treadmills and an ice hockey game that won't finish until 10 p.m. The fish is supple in parts, crisp skin in others, covered by a thicket of fresh herbs and greens. A dunk in nuoc cham, a Vietnamese dipping sauce, adds a peppy zing.

Dessert plays into the I-earned-it camp with a fudgy brownie topped with ice cream, whipped cream and sprinkles. There are no tricks here, just a straightforward classic. It's nothing to travel for, but on the way out from working up a sweat, do calories even count?

NOTES

Vim & Victor SCENE

This full-service restaurant lives inside of a gym, expect casual dress, casual service and upscale-casual food.

DON'T MISS

Golden latte, smoothie bowls, whole branzino

The St. James: 6805 Industrial Road, Springfield;
vimandvictor.com

Open daily for lunch and dinner

Small plates \$12-\$16; Entrees \$17-\$29