

The Business

thebusiness@chicagoreader.com

All Talk

Chicago Public Radio isn't just ditching its plans for an all-music station—it's ditching music programs altogether.

By Deanna Isaacs

When Chicago Public Radio general manager Torey Malatia announced plans last summer to split WBEZ programming into two streams—talk on 91.5, music on 89.5—he made a point of leaving himself some wiggle room. Last week he not only wiggled but did a major flip, announcing a change in plans that apparently came as a surprise even to many on his staff. The new plan, tentatively scheduled to go into effect early next year, calls for dumping music programs entirely and turning WBEZ into a second talk station. In a related move, longtime WBEZ music director Chris Heim was let go on April 4, her position eliminated. (Heim couldn't be reached for comment.) Tony Sarabia will replace her as host of *Passport* for the next few months. Malatia says the remaining music staff will be reassigned to public affairs or asked to help develop the new programming.

WBEZ, the Chesterton outpost acquired by CPR over three years ago, is about to get a wattage boost that'll expand its broadcast to nearly the entire Chicago area. The station is now being envisioned as a "multimedia service" intended to snare a younger and more diverse audience. Malatia says WBEZ will continue to do interviews with local musicians on shows like *Eight Forty-Eight*, and WBEZ will frequently play full cuts as segments within its public affairs-and-culture format, but neither will offer a "consistent stream of music, no place where you can go and hear music for a half hour at a stretch." Shows that will disappear include local productions like *Comin' Home*, *Encanto Latino*, and *Jazz with Dick Buckley* and syndicated programs including *Afropop Worldwide* and *Blues Before Sunrise*.

The new 89.5 will largely emanate from the Navy Pier studios—which are being remodeled to accommodate a newspaper-style city desk—but will also make use of community bureaus in the Chicago area and Chesterton, each staffed with a reporter and/or a producer. Aimed at people who aren't interested in "long-form network-based discussions," the programming will have a local focus. "It won't be civic journalism," he says, "but it will have elements of that—the firsthand view of the community through the eyes of the community."



Torey Malatia

Segments will be "mixed up" so you get a sense "in a short period of time of a whole bunch of things happening." He says that's the kind of pacing and variety nontraditional public radio listeners are used to, "what they hear when they go to [commercial] stations or to television or the Internet—one Web site after another, rapid movement." There'll be a separate Web site intended to feed the new stream, where people could be "talking about suggested segments or ideas, or even producing audio that we might be able to work with them on." If the plan is successful, he says, 89.5 will be so distinctive from 91.5 that "people will stumble upon it and wonder what this is and who's behind it. I don't think they'll have a clue that it's a Chicago Public Radio product."

Malatia says he wants to find a place for "every single person on staff" before anyone new is hired. Over the next six weeks they'll develop a budget to present to the board, which could still scuttle the plan. Though this has to be a more expensive option than an all-music station, he says it might be just as manageable if the Web component becomes a major source of content. Malatia doesn't know of any existing models for the whole package, and says he expects that as they experiment with these ideas they may "morph into something a little different." He says the change of heart was evolutionary, driven by the "melting away of public service media around us" through mergers and disinvestment. "As we

looked at the highest and best use of this new resource," he says, "it became clear to us that while doing music serves many wonderful purposes, what's needed now is a place where people can be encouraged to think about making change and can face issues that divide us as a community."

Dick Buckley, who's been on WBEZ for nearly 30 years as an independent contractor and on the Chicago airwaves since 1956, said last weekend all he knows is what he read in the paper: "They haven't discussed word one with me. But I've found during all the years I've spent in radio, once the big decision is made, nothing will change it." For Buckley, who's recovering from surgery and whose wife is in assisted

care, the loss of his Sunday afternoon gig comes at a particularly bad time. "I'm 81, too old to go out and humbly ask someone to hire a dinosaur," he says. "I've given this a lot of thought. I think I'll put together some lectures. But if you know anybody that needs a good jazz program..."

Hizzoner Would Approve

Why should ticket brokers be the only ones to benefit? Prop Thtr's production of Neil Giuntoli's *Hizzoner* is a hit, and Prop is raising the price from \$25 to \$32, effective May 1. Director Stefan Brun says the addition of a Saturday matinee means they have to feed cast and crew. The show's in an open run. **B**

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Restaurants

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Reader staff and contributors and (where noted) individual Raters. Though reviewers try to reflect the Restaurant Raters' input, reviews should be considered one person's opinion; the collective Raters' opinions are best expressed in the numbers. The complete listings and information on how to become a Reader Restaurant Rater are available at www.chicagoreader.com/restaurantfinder.

R

Ladies and Gentlemen, Your Top 50

The best of the best, as determined by Reader Restaurant Raters' overall scores

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A. JACKSON

A Tavola

2148 W. Chicago | 773-276-7567

F 8.5 | S 8.8 | A 7.8 | \$\$\$ (17 REPORTS)

ITALIAN | DINNER: MONDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED SUNDAY

■■■■ A Tavola is the sort of place you could walk past a hundred times and never notice. There isn't a sign in front, only the restaurant's name etched in the frosted glass of a front window. The dining room, on the first floor of a converted house in Ukrainian Village, is dimly lit and intimate, with only nine tables total. The menu is equally tiny, enough so that strict vegetarians will have a difficult time making the most of it. I went with the halibut, lightly

dusted with seasoned flour and panfried, accompanied by a lemon and caper sauce—simple, but perfectly moist and light. Of the three appetizers on the menu, the combo of grilled portobello and sauteed oyster mushrooms stood out—the flavor was surprisingly complex. There are also three small pasta dishes, including the best gnocchi I've ever had, swimming in sage butter and topped with fried sage leaves. The "vanilla-scented" panna cotta (sorry, but that's a descriptor best left to candles) I had for dessert looked like flan and tasted like marshmallow. Fortunately, I like marshmallows. I'm also one who believes there are few more wonderful things you

can do to food than bake it with a crisp crust of Parmesan cheese, which is why the polenta, thick and gooey, may have been my favorite. There was one bite left at the end of the night, and I seriously thought about having it wrapped up. **David Wilcox**

Alinea

1723 N. Halsted | 312-867-0110

F 10.0 | S 9.7 | A 8.3 | \$\$\$\$ (6 REPORTS)

AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY/REGIONAL | DINNER: SUNDAY, WEDNESDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED MONDAY-TUESDAY

■■■■ Discreetly located in a town house spitting distance from chef Grant Achatz's first

employer, Charlie Trotter, Alinea is marked only by a valet's sandwich board at the curb. Inside, a dining room and glass-walled kitchen share the first floor; up a set of glass stairs covered by metal mesh mats are two more small, luxuriously spare dining rooms. The menu has changed since I went there, but the concept remains the same: prix fixe tasting menus of experimental cuisine in 12 (\$125) or a daunting 24 (\$175) courses; wine pairings add to the bill. Achatz's initial offerings included bacon mounted on a trapeze and the by-now-notorious PB&J amuse—a peeled grape slathered with peanut butter, wrapped in brioche, and served, with stem, atop a wicked-looking wire contraption. His

current menu opens with Hot Potato, a tiny bowl of chilled potato soup with a pin bearing a chunk of hot potato, Parmesan, butter, and a slice of black truffle; to eat it you slide the pin out so the potato and truffle drop into the soup, then slurp it as you would an oyster. Lamb comes under a veil of eucalyptus, foie gras with hibiscus over a small bowl of blueberry soda, duck with a pillow of "mace air." The Alinea experience remains tightly controlled, with specific instructions as to how certain dishes should be eaten. Under less polished conditions this would be annoyingly pretentious, but the soothing rituals of fine dining can take the edge off the edgiest of cuisines. **Martha Bayne**

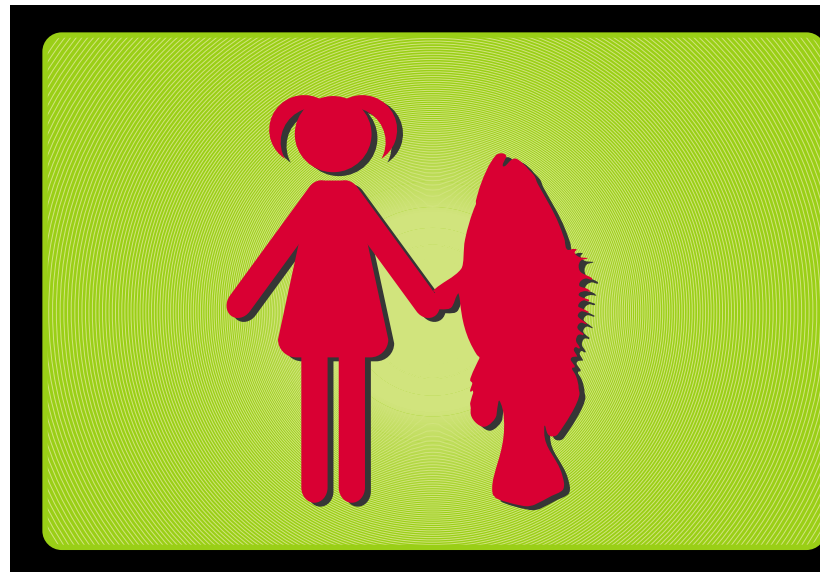
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Restaurants

Allen's: The New American Cafe
217 W. Huron | 312-587-9600

F 9.2 | S 8.6 | A 7.8 | \$\$\$\$ (13 REPORTS)
AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY/REGIONAL | LUNCH:
MONDAY-FRIDAY; DINNER: MONDAY-SATURDAY |
CLOSED SUNDAY | OPEN LATE: FRIDAY &
SATURDAY TILL 11

ЯЯЯ Chef Allen Sternweiler presents a seasonal menu, using local farm products whenever possible and only the freshest seafood. On one visit a firm white-fleshed fish called escolar came in a luscious champagne butter with wild ramps, and mango-jicama salsa topped some nicely browned crab cakes. A trio of rabbit includes a tender sauteed loin, a braised leg, and sausage. Other appealing options include sauteed walleye over duck confit with smoked bacon and wild mushroom hash, a roast pork loin with pork belly hash, and a grilled beef fillet served with a blue cheese potato gratin. Entree prices average in the high 20s (the fillet is \$40); at lunch, entrees, salads, and burgers run in the midteens. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Aria
200 N. Columbus | 312-444-9494

F 9.0 | S 9.1 | A 8.0 | \$\$\$\$ (7 REPORTS)
GLOBAL/FUSION/ELECTIC | BREAKFAST, LUNCH,
DINNER: SEVEN DAYS | OPEN LATE: FRIDAY &
SATURDAY TILL 11

ЯЯЯ Noah Bekofsky, who trained at the Culinary Institute of America, did a stint at the Kapalua Bay Hotel in Maui, and he brings a Hawaiian influence to his menu here with dishes like curried chicken-and-pork *lumpia* (cigarlike rolls with mango vinaigrette and a sweet-and-sour dipping sauce) and a cold starter of Hawaiian tuna *poke* (sashimi-grade tuna tartare drizzled with soy and toasted sesame oil). There are a few Asian dishes, like duck-and-lobster chow mein and roasted black cod glazed with a sweet mirin soy sauce and served with mashed snap peas. The aromatic vegetable curry, accompanied by jasmine rice with almonds and currants, can be ordered as an appetizer portion or an entree. The menu's obligatory Chicago Cuts section lists supersize steaks and chops, all served with potted onions and portobellos. You get a plate of naan fresh from a tandoori oven when you sit down, plus four dipping sauces. The adjacent bar serves small plates, a large array of martinis, and an extensive global wine list the staff seems to have mastered. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Art of Pizza
3033 N. Ashland | 773-327-5600

F 8.3 | S 6.8 | A 3.5 | \$ (5 REPORTS)
PIZZA, ITALIAN | LUNCH, DINNER: SEVEN DAYS |
RESERVATIONS NOT ACCEPTED | BYO

ЯЯЯ I'm not usually a fan of pan pizza—I've encountered too many gummy, half-raw bottom crusts—but the Art of Pizza's pan crust is crisp and buttery, with only a bit of chewiness. Even more impressive: toppings here aren't superfluously greasy. The menu forgoes froufrou California-style pies in favor of specialties such as "Art's Meaty Delight" (sausage, bacon, ground beef, pepperoni, and sliced beef). Reasonably priced subs, sandwiches, ribs, chicken, and pasta dishes are also available, along with prepackaged salads and cake slices for carryout. The adjacent bar serves small plates, a large array of martinis, and an extensive global wine list the staff seems to have mastered. **Anne Ford**

Arun's
4156 N. Kedzie | 773-539-1909

F 9.1 | S 9.3 | A 8.0 | \$\$\$\$ (16 REPORTS)
THAI, ASIAN | DINNER: SUNDAY, TUESDAY-
SATURDAY | CLOSED MONDAY

ЯЯЯ I'll admit the most overRRated Thai restaurant on the planet is a fine-dining player—service is well oiled and professional, the surroundings are a fantasia of lysergic folk art, and the food is prepared by people who know how to cook. But for the price of the degustation with wine pairings at Arun's you could put together five more surprising, authentic, and delicious ones at Spoon Thai, TAC Quick, Siam's House, or Sticky Rice. If you can't be convinced of that, \$85 and your willing suspension of disbelief gets you 12 courses of Arun Sampanthavivat's exquisitely plated but domesticated versions of his homeland's cuisine. While the staff makes the perfunctory effort of accommodating culinary preferences and taboos, it seems diners are not to be trusted with the more aggressively spiced and funkier flavors of Thai cuisine—even if they ask. The event begins with six appetizer courses, in which every wonderful detail seems to be unbalanced by an inappropriate one: maybe a one-bite salad

arrives perched on a perfectly shaped betel nut leaf, which imparts an earthier flavor than the usual lettuce, but then an oyster pancake will be drizzled with Sriracha, the Heinz ketchup of the Far East. Appetizers are followed by four main courses served all at once, family style, many of which overrely on the sweet end of the Thai spectrum; fat, fresh prawns with an unusual and tangy purple mountain fern might come with a lobster Willy Wonka'd by a sweet, brown, cornstarchy sauce more suited to Chinese takeout. On my most recent visit the dish that was perhaps the least authentic was my favorite—a fist-size hunk of tender pot roast in green curry drizzled with coconut cream. Given the notorious challenges in pairing Thai food with the grape, someone at Arun's does a really good job matching things up. Then again, the delicate Brut Laurent Perrier that came with crispy fried pike on chard, bean sprouts, and sweet-and-sour rhubarb would get its ass kicked by something like a real papaya salad with chiles and dried shrimp. Any fine-dining experience in this price range requires more than a few wows over 12 courses. The only one I recall was my first glance of the amazing mural depicting struggle between good and evil—eight months in the making—that Sampanthavivat's brother was painting in the main dining room. **Mike Sula**

Avenues
108 E. Superior | 312-573-6754

F 9.0 | S 9.0 | A 9.0 | \$\$\$\$ (6 REPORTS)
AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY/REGIONAL | DINNER:
TUESDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED SUNDAY-MONDAY

ЯЯЯ Yes, the "foielipop" is still on the menu. A dense, sweet, creamy disk of foie gras impaled on a stick and coated with Pop Rocks that send flavor coursing straight to your cerebral cortex, it's the signature showstopper in one of chef Graham Elliot Bowles's five ambitious tasting menus. It's hard when something this flamboyant and just plain trippy turns up in the second course—nothing else quite matches it for sheer entertainment value. But several other dishes actually did outshine the little gray lolly. Delicately roasted squab, for one, came dressed with a dark, smoky bacon and laurel-scented kalamata olive tapenade. Paper-thin rounds of slightly gamy kangaroo carpaccio, served with tiny "noodles" made of cantaloupe and cucumber, lime caramel, and an aromatic eucalyptus foam, were another winner. But despite all the experimentation Bowles has become famous for, my friend and I voted a simple beef tenderloin best in show: velvety and rare at its core, it was ever-so-slightly charred and dusted with sea salt. Not every dish made the finals: a single seared scallop over a sunchoke pudding was oddly monochromatic, and the mild flavors in a quintet of rabbit loin, leg, rillette, bacon, and kidney were no match for the exquisitely fussy presentation. But my only real complaint is with the service. While our lead waiter was assured and impeccably helpful, the young, apparently inexperienced bench wasn't nearly as polished. Still, this gracious Peninsula Hotel dining room well deserves the buckets of praise heaped on it since Bowles, a vet of Trotter's and Tru, took over two years ago. **Martha Bayne**

Blackbird
619 W. Randolph | 312-715-0708

F 9.2 | S 8.5 | A 6.8 | \$\$\$ (20 REPORTS)
AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY/REGIONAL | LUNCH:
MONDAY-FRIDAY; DINNER: MONDAY-SATURDAY |
CLOSED SUNDAY | OPEN LATE: FRIDAY &
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sterism. There are the monogrammed disposable restroom washcloths. There's the careful menu notation that waitstaff wear Joseph Abboud (and are therefore smarter looking than 80 percent of any given seating). And then there's the sterile white-and-steel space that would make a lab rat feel at home. On the other hand, for fine dining with a rotation of top-notch seasonal ingredients, served by a crack cadre of skilled food-service ninjas who would die for your smallest whim, chef Paul Kahan is still at the top of the game. Don't do what I did last time, succumbing to my basest instincts and ordering every course that had some sort of cured pork product in it. By the time I'd finished my endive salad with poached egg and pancetta, seared diver scallops with guanciale, and grilled pork chop with braised pork belly, summer truffles, and figs, my alimentary canal felt like the Bonneville Salt Flats, and my plan to finish with the chocolate semifreddo with waffles and bacon was foiled. The salad, scallops, and pig-part duo are old favorites at Blackbird, varying seasonally, so you owe it to yourself, and to Kahan's sense of bal-

ance, to branch out: give that west-coast mussel soup with saffron, garlic, and basil a slurp or try the sauteed skate wing and jonah crab with blood oranges, parsnips, and brown butter. Come to think of it there's a lot of fruit showing up with the meat: suckling pig with grapes, quail with apple, lamb with plums, leading to further challenges in the area of wine selection, sometimes met by the guidance of your waiter, sometimes not. **Mike Sula**

Boka
1729 N. Halsted | 312-337-6070

F 9.3 | S 8.5 | A 8.7 | \$\$\$ (22 REPORTS)
AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY/REGIONAL, SMALL PLATES | DINNER: SEVEN DAYS | OPEN LATE: FRIDAY & SATURDAY TILL 11

ЯЯЯ This trendy restaurant has a front lounge area that doubles as an extra dining room on busy nights; it's separated from the main room by a long, frequently packed bar. But the ambitious menu by chef Giuseppe Scurato (Postrio, Spago, MK) features unpretentious and nicely executed small and large plates like steamed mussels in saffron-boni-

to broth, pan-roasted maple-leaf duck breast with a wild-mushroom ragout, and glazed Atlantic salmon with shiitakes, napa cabbage, snow peas, bean curd, and a tamari-truffle sauce. About 20 wines are poured by the glass and more than 100 are available by the bottle. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Cafe Absinthe
1954 W. North | 773-278-4488
F 8.7 | S 8.0 | A 7.7 | \$\$\$ (15 REPORTS)
GLOBAL/FUSION/ECCLECTIC | DINNER: SEVEN DAYS

ЯЯЯ Unlike many of the trendy boites in Wicker Park, Cafe Absinthe has secured a niche as a classic neighborhood restaurant through an unpretentious combination of well-executed food and relaxed yet expert service. We began with the starter of stuffed calamari on a bed of nicely dressed greens, followed by some garlic-potato soup, which started out smooth but finished with a mild kick. For main courses my friend had the rack of lamb and I enjoyed the seared scallops atop creamy mashed potatoes garnished with intensely flavorful mushrooms. Our friendly (flirta-

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Fresh rolls filled with avocado, cucumber, bean sprout, egg & cream cheese, dressed with tamarind sauce. 4.50

Pot Stickers (5)
Wheat flour pastries filled with luscious blend of shrimp and garden vegetables, served with delicious sesame sauce. 4.00

Thai Rolls
Shrimp, chicken, crabmeat and mint leaves wrapped in rice paper, served with sweet & sour peanut sauce. 4.50

Crab Rangoon (6)
Minced crabmeat and cream cheese served with sweet and sour sauce. 4.00

Cucumber Salad
Fresh cucumber and onion with house sweet & sour dressing. 2.50

Tom Yam Soup
Hot & Sour soup with straw mushrooms, tomato, seasoned with lemon grass, citrus leaves and fresh limejuice. chicken, tofu or vegetables 3.50 (shrimp 4.00)

Tom Kha Soup
Coconut soup with straw mushrooms and tomato spiced with galanga root, citrus leaves and fresh limejuice. chicken, tofu or vegetables 3.50 (shrimp 4.00)

Noodles

Chicken, Beef, Tofu or Plain Vegetable (Shrimp 8.00)

Pad Thai
The most famous Thai noodles dish!
Stir-fried thin rice noodles with cabbage, bean sprout, egg and crushed peanuts. 6.50

Pad See Eiw
Stir-fried wide rice noodles with egg, broccoli and sweet soy sauce. 6.50

Lard na
Fried wide rice noodles topped with broccoli in delicious house gravy. 6.50

Pad Khee Mao
Stir-fried wide rice noodles with basil leaves, carrot, green beans, baby corns, tomato and hot pepper. 6.50

Crazy Noodles
Stir-fried wide rice noodles with egg, carrot, bean sprout and snow peas. 6.50

Thai Rice Stick
Stir-fried rice noodles with Chinese broccoli, egg and sweet soy sauce. 6.50

Golden Noodles
Stir-fried egg noodles with egg, carrot, snow peas, straw mushrooms and Chinese broccoli. 6.50

Garlic Chicken Noodles
Tasty egg noodles with bean sprout and crushed peanuts topped with delicious sautéed garlic chicken. 6.50

Curry Dishes

Phuket Noodles
Stir-fried spinach noodles with curry, napa cabbage, onion, carrot, bean sprout and egg. 7.00

Panang Curry
The most popular Thai curry served on crispy wide rice noodles. 7.00

Chicken Coconut Curry
Golden noodles with chicken in tasty coconut curry, sprinkled with onion and crispy golden noodles, served with cucumber salad. 7.00

Rice Dishes (includes steamed rice)

Beef and Broccoli
Sautéed beef with broccoli in oyster-garlic sauce. 7.00

Chicken 'n Rice
Sautéed chicken, baby corns, onion, snow peas and straw mushrooms in delicious mild gravy. 7.00

BBQ Pork & Rice
BBQ pork and steamed broccoli with ginger gravy. 7.50

Spicy Basil Leaves
Sautéed with fresh basil, straw mushrooms, onion and hot pepper. chicken, beef, tofu or vegetables 7.00 (shrimp 8.50)

Rama Special
Sautéed chicken topped with peanut sauce, garnished with steamed broccoli. 7.50 (shrimp 9.00)

Ginger Chicken
Stir-fried chicken with sliced ginger, bell pepper, straw mushrooms, baby corns and onion in delicious bean sauce. 7.00

Cashew Chicken
Stir-fried chicken with cashew nuts, pineapple, snow peas, tomato, onion, bell pepper and dried hot pepper. 7.00 (shrimp 8.50)

Garlic sauce
Sautéed with fresh garlic and white pepper, garnished with steamed broccoli. chicken, beef, tofu or vegetables 7.50 (shrimp 9.00)

Fried Rice
Thai fried rice
chicken, beef, tofu or vegetables 6.50 (shrimp 8.00)

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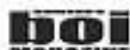
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Restaurants

tious?) waiter was able to recommend a wine that nicely complemented all these dishes, a 2004 Westrey pinot noir. Dessert—espresso and rich devil's food cake with cocoa sorbet and chocolate-covered cherries—sent us into that blissful coma haze every indulgent meal should end with. **Katherine Young**

Cafe Matou

1846 N. Milwaukee | 773-384-8911

F 8.4 | S 7.6 | A 8.6 | \$\$\$ (17 REPORTS)
FRENCH | DINNER: SUNDAY, TUESDAY-SATURDAY |
CLOSED MONDAY | OPEN LATE: FRIDAY &
SATURDAY TILL 11

ЯЯЯ This Bucktown storefront has its little airs: witness the untranslated French preamble on the cover of the wine list. But it also has its comforts: woody decor, pressed-tile ceilings, and chairs right out of your grandfather's office. Chef Charlie Socher terms his food "cuisine bourgeoise"—which is to say French, but for the most part without the usual accompanying presumption. The house salad is served simply with a light oil, the liver paté is buttery smooth, and a seafood bourride sings with tarragon. Still, bourgeois or no, it's all about the sauces, and on this evening (the menu changes daily) rich duck came with a classic pinot noir-green peppercorn number handily sopped up with a Jerusalem artichoke puree. Socher offers a three-course dinner Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday for \$22, and every fourth Wednesday is a "cellar raid" with select bottles of wine for \$17. So don't take umbrage when the waiter corrects your pronunciation of *paté*. **Ted Cox**

Carlos'

429 Temple, Highland Park | 847-432-0770

F 9.7 | S 9.2 | A 9.6 | \$\$\$\$\$ (5 REPORTS)
FRENCH | DINNER: SUNDAY-MONDAY,
WEDNESDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED TUESDAY

ЯЯЯ Carlos and Debbie Nieto have operated this intimate French dining room in Highland Park for over 20 years. The atmosphere is regal, with handsome dark-wood trim, richly toned fabrics, and elegant porcelain dinnerware. Ramiro Velasquez runs the kitchen, dazzling patrons with the expertise he gained under such powerhouses as Jacky Pluton, Don Yamauchi, Eric Aubriot, and Alan Wolf. A la carte dishes include succulent escargots baked in brioche with artichoke hearts, served with a Roquefort-Pernod sauce, and Hot and Cold Foie Gras—seared Hudson Valley foie gras with grenadine-infused caramelized onions and chilled La Belle Farms foie gras on banana bread with vanilla syrup. A seven-course degustation menu (\$90) with optional paired wines (\$130) is a dining adventure, with appetizers like squab breast served with chestnut foie gras custard, pea pods, and huckleberry gastrique. Entrees include herb-crustured Australian rack of lamb with vegetable gratin and polenta, and rabbit loin wrapped in prosciutto with purple potatoes and leek spaghetti. (A vegetarian meal will be prepared upon request.) The encyclopedic wine list is mostly French but also offers American, Australian, and German options. On Mondays diners can bring their own wine—there's no corkage fee—and servers will suggest food pairings from the menu. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Food (**F**), service (**S**), and ambience (**A**) are rated on a scale of 1-10, with 10 representing best. The dinner-menu price of a typical entree is indicated by dollar signs on the following scale: \$=less than \$10, \$\$=\$10-\$15, \$\$\$=\$15-\$20, \$\$\$\$=\$20-\$30, \$\$\$\$\$=more than \$30. Raters also grade the overall dining experience; these scores are averaged and **Яs** are awarded as follows: **ЯЯЯ**=top 10 percent, **ЯЯ**=top 20 percent, **ЯЯЯ**=top 30 percent of all rated restaurants in database.

Catch 35

35 W. Wacker | 312-346-3500

F 9.2 | S 8.9 | A 8.4 | \$\$\$\$ (9 REPORTS)
SEAFOOD | LUNCH: MONDAY-FRIDAY; DINNER:
SEVEN DAYS

ЯЯЯ The crowd is mostly business at this seafood restaurant nestled inside the Leo Burnett building, and the room is flashy in a late-80s way—oceanscape mural, art deco fixtures, revolving piano bar. Dishes are prepared with an admirably light touch and often show an Asian influence: soft-shell crab comes with Szechuan glaze, Chilean sea bass with ginger-scallion sauce. The menu's huge—there are three dozen seafood specials daily—and Raters agree it's best experienced on an expense account. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Charlie Trotter's

816 W. Armitage | 773-248-6228

F 9.1 | S 8.8 | A 7.8 | \$\$\$\$\$ (17 REPORTS)
AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY/REGIONAL,
GLOBAL/FUSION/ELECTIC | DINNER: TUESDAY-
SATURDAY | CLOSED SUNDAY-MONDAY

ЯЯЯ At its best this Lincoln Park landmark strokes every human sense. When I dined there last the eight-course grand tasting menu started with salty-sweet Tasmanian

ocean trout with spiky, even saltier hijiki; then there was halibut served with tender, glowing baby asparagus on a bed of supersavory turnip puree. The vegetable tasting menu was often more attention grabbing: the amuse-gueule was a combination of spongy morels and crisp fiddlehead ferns that tasted of deep dark dirt and dew, and the caramelized Maui onion soup with a sweet-onion flan at the bottom made our eyes roll back in our heads. Is the food fussy? Yes. Everything is painstakingly constructed: arranged with droplets of onion relish and tiny snips of parsley, the guinea fowl and celeriac looked a bit like *Starry Night*. All the desserts were astonishing, but so was the bread—fresh, warm, and chewy, based on various grains and in one case Carolina low-country rice, with just the thinnest flavor of salt in the crust. The wine degustation is what puts the average per-diner cost over \$200, and it's more than worth it. Our meal began with a pale Bellini, an indulgence that set just the right note, then moved on to a crisp Larmandier-Bernier blanc de blancs brut, a delicate Kruger-Rumpf Riesling Kabinett, a Movia pinot nero full of leather and smoke, and a Bodegas Catena Zapata "Alta" cabernet sauvignon. The meal ended with an Olivares "Dulce" Monastrell and a petal yellow honeysuckle-flavored Tokaji-

Aszu "5 Puttonyos" Chateau Pajzos that made me think about late afternoon sun and shadows sliding through art nouveau buildings in Budapest. After five happy hours I walked into the evening with the scents of lavender and peas and fennel still playing in my nose. **Elizabeth M. Tamny**

The Dining Room at the Ritz-Carlton

160 E. Pearson | 312-573-5223

F 9.4 | S 10.0 | A 9.1 | \$\$\$\$\$ (9 REPORTS)
FRENCH | DINNER: SUNDAY, TUESDAY-SATURDAY;
SUNDAY BRUNCH | CLOSED MONDAY | OPEN LATE:
FRIDAY & SATURDAY TILL 11

ЯЯЯ It's nice to know that someone's remaining firmly rooted in tradition, if for no other reason than to provide a reference point for all that reinvention. Former executive sous-chef Mark Payne has stepped up as the Dining Room's executive chef, and he's reworked the menu in a more European light: butter-mounted, cream-enriched sauces were on nearly every plate, while global influences—blood orange, candied ginger, and Spanish *lomo* (smoked pork loin)—were as muted as the facial expressions of the well-heeled clientele. One can dine a la carte or opt for the chef's seven-course tasting menu (\$105), which is also offered in a vegetarian option. Portions are generous and rich—almost too rich. We moved from a large hunk of perfect foie gras to a butter-drenched lobster course to a Wagyu brisket with rich bordelaise sauce to an ultracreamy wedge of Robiola Langhe sheep's milk cheese. (I thought it strange and even a bit lazy that both the cheese course and the foie gras



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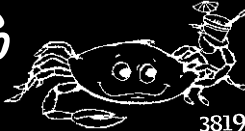


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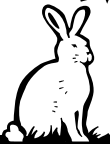
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Restaurants

were garnished with rhubarb compote.) Highlights were a smoky sunchoke and spring garlic soup, which arrived at exactly the right temperature, and an ice-cold oyster "martini" with beet sorbet and creme fraiche. Dessert came in three parts—a strawberry sorbet, then a giant architectural creation featuring chocolate and bananas, and finally petits fours. The Dining Room offers Chicago's gold-standard Sunday brunch (\$60), which is worth the price just for the pristine seafood and world-class cheese board. **Kristina Meyer**

Dorado Restaurant

2301 W. Foster | 773-561-3780

F 8.9 | S 8.2 | A 7.7 | \$\$\$ (13 REPORTS)
MEXICAN/SOUTHWESTERN,
GLOBAL/FUSION/ECCLECTIC | DINNER: SUNDAY,
TUESDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED MONDAY | OPEN
LATE: FRIDAY & SATURDAY TILL 11 | BYO

YYY At this Ravenswood restaurant, Luis Perez applies the French bistro cooking techniques he learned under Jack Jones (as chef de cuisine at Jack's American Blend and Bistro Marbuzet and sous-chef at Daniel J's) to the Mexican food his mother cooked when he was growing up. His brief menu offers unique takes on Mexican favorites like roast pork (his version is a thick tenderloin, rosy and tender and served with a guajillo cream sauce) and delicious combinations like a crunchy almond-crusted trout laced with satiny coconut cream sauce and caramelized plantains, a lovely contrast of earthy and sweet. For dessert there's one of the richest flans around and a moist, light tres leches cake. The typical entree is priced in the mids, and the place is still BYO—consider bringing a light-to-medium-bodied red wine (like a pinot noir from Burgundy or Oregon) or even a full-bodied white (like a Condrieu from the Rhone Valley or a Riesling from Wachau, Austria). **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Everest

440 S. LaSalle | 312-663-8920

F 9.3 | S 9.7 | A 8.5 | \$\$\$\$\$ (12 REPORTS)
FRENCH | DINNER: TUESDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED
SUNDAY-MONDAY

YYY When I told friends I'd be dining at Everest, they all said that it ain't what it used to be. I was accordingly wary as we made our way up to the 40th floor of the Chicago Stock Exchange on a Friday night. But if the leopard-print carpeting, white lacquered columns, and brass railings seemed dated, that impression was quickly dispelled as our dinner got under way with a glass of champagne. The wine list, now under sommelier Stephen McGinnis

(Alpana Singh left in the fall), is justly renowned for its superior selection of Alsations. It also offers an eye-popping selection of Chateau Lafittes and other top-notch Bordeaux with spectacular prices to match. We opted for chef Jean Joho's seven-course tasting menu with wine pairings. Dinner began with an amuse bouche of a mousse-light brandade of cod, a sip of artichoke soup, and a dab of celery remoulade festooned with a crispy piece of fried fish. The sauce accompanying smoky-flavored roast lobster bore hints of horseradish, a flavor that came to the fore later in the form of horseradish-crusted grouper. A single scallop served atop a bed of shredded cabbage was dressed in a hauntingly good sauce featuring *melfor*, an Alsatian honeyed vinegar, with hints of bacon and pleasant bursts of caraway. The crowning dish, a medallion of venison served with tiny portions of spaetzle and red cabbage, was a revelation. This was followed by an impressive selection of artisanal cheeses. Throughout the wine pairings, which included classic Alsatian offerings such as a Tokay, a Riesling, and a pinot gris as well as a big American zinfandel with the cheese course, were right on the mark. We floated through the desserts on a cloud of bliss right up to our after-dinner coffees offered with a selection of petits fours. Perhaps Everest is not the most au courant spot on the scene, and frankly, it's crazy expensive. But there's something comforting about a classic fine-dining experience where two people are seated at a table vast enough for six and when you return from the bathroom you find that some mysterious imp has refolded your napkin for you. **Kathie Bergquist**

Fogo de Chao

661 N. LaSalle | 312-932-9330

F 8.5 | S 9.1 | A 7.9 | \$\$\$\$ (28 REPORTS)
LATIN AMERICAN | LUNCH: MONDAY-FRIDAY;
DINNER: SEVEN DAYS

YYY The huge industrial space works well with the service concept at this Brazilian *churrascaria* (steak house): not only is there plenty of room for the enormous center salad bar, but the circulating "gauchos" (servers dressed in those below-the-knee pants) can glide easily from table to table with their huge metal skewers of meat. At this branch of a Sao Paulo chain, the gauchos serve as many helpings as you want of spit-roasted beef, lamb, pork, and chicken for a set price (\$48.50, or \$29.50 for lunch). You flip a cardboard marker to green when you want them to approach the table, red when you've got enough on your plate. You can request a desired

degree of doneness, but with the meat cycling back to the fire after a few cuts, chances are you won't get anything that resembles rare (we didn't, anyhow). The room is detailed in granite, slate, and natural-colored stones, and an enormous wine rack acts as a divider between the main dining room and the private space in back. Mashed potatoes, fried bananas, polenta, and cheese fries come as sides, but it's hard to give them any attention with all the activity. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Le Francais

269 S. Milwaukee, Wheeling | 847-541-7470

F 9.8 | S 8.8 | A 8.8 | \$\$\$\$\$ (5 REPORTS)
FRENCH | LUNCH: TUESDAY-FRIDAY; DINNER:
MONDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED SUNDAY

YYY Chef Roland Liccioni dazzles: on one visit his perfectly prepared dishes included *caviar en gelee et foie gras en toast*—a tiny porcelain cup of osetra caviar suspended in gelatin and topped with cauliflower cream occupied one corner of an oversize rectangular plate, across from a slice of toasted brioche covered with creamy chilled foie gras; between them was a bed of microgreens. While the lobster bisque served with the *gâteau de St. Jacques* (scallop cake) was heavily salted, the cucumber salad that accompanied it alleviated the salt a bit, and the cake itself was pan-seared to crispy perfection. A moist skin-side-up sea bass fillet was served with pureed eggplant and a refreshing water-cress sauce, with extremely thin strands of spaetzle tossed across the fish. Liccioni's signature duos and trios don't dominate the menu as they did at Les Nomades and still do at Le Lan, although the *duo de veau poche et entrecote age*—an ample portion of veal wrapped first in steamed cabbage and then in a thin layer of crispy dough—was served during his first tenure here and makes a welcome comeback. Sadly, while Liccioni has brought Le Francais' food back to its original glory, the artificial flower arrangement in the entryway is only the worst example of the room's stilted interior design. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Green Zebra

1460 W. Chicago | 312-243-7100

F 8.9 | S 8.2 | A 7.1 | \$\$\$ (19 REPORTS)
SMALL PLATES, VEGETARIAN/HEALTHY,
AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY/REGIONAL | DINNER:
SUNDAY, TUESDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED MONDAY

YYY It's been two years since chef Shawn McClain transformed a dilapidated East Village storefront known to me and my neighbors as the "pigeon palace" into a sleek haven for vegetarian dining, and for

the most part the kitchen has settled into a comfortable groove. On a recent visit the seasonally changing menu of generous tasting portions showcased a rainbow of winter veggies: roasted beets wrapped around tiny cylinders of goat cheese; butternut squash gnocchi; crispy sweet potato dumplings and water chestnuts in a dandelion miso broth. A rich parsnip panna cotta served with braised endive, blood orange wedges, and a few teeny biscuits packed an amazing amount of flavor, a surprisingly tangy kick following each initially sweet, smooth mouthful. A small crock of artichoke cassoulet tucked 'chokes, beans, and braised kale beneath a buttery puff pastry crust. A substantial savory crepe, stuffed full of curried apples, was a standout, and typical of Green Zebra's playful attitude toward flavor—as my friend noted, perhaps half the dishes we tried were sweeter than your average entree, while our desserts—brown butter millet cake and a coconut risotto pudding served with roasted pineapple and marinated avocado (!)—were so nutty and mild you could have 'em for breakfast. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the only real misstep was the roasted skate wing, one of two nonvegetarian items on the menu. The pricey wine list is heavy on crisp whites and a few lighter, brighter reds. After-dinner options include French-press coffee and some wildly exotic teas, including one that according to the menu was once harvested by monkeys. Servers are well-informed and helpful, and with the exception of the small, stoolless bar area I'm still impressed with the number McClain and company did on the space, all cool earth tones and warm low lights punctuated by bursts of greenery reaching for the sky. **Martha Bayne**

The Handlebar

2311 W. North | 773-384-9546

F 8.4 | S 7.3 | A 7.8 | \$ (24 REPORTS)
GLOBAL/FUSION/ECCLECTIC,
VEGETARIAN/HEALTHY | DINNER: SEVEN DAYS;
SATURDAY AND SUNDAY BRUNCH | OPEN LATE:
FRIDAY & SATURDAY TILL 1, OTHER NIGHTS TILL
11 | RESERVATIONS NOT ACCEPTED

YYY A group of friends dragged me to the Handlebar for the first time two days after I moved to Chicago. It was late on a snowy Friday night, and over the course of three hours we ordered practically everything on the menu, getting riotously drunk on bourbon, tequila, and beer. One couple wound up necking in a dark corner while another, completely out of character, played bloody knuckles by the bar. I wouldn't say that's appropriate behavior

for the Handlebar, but it won't get you kicked out either. A dimly lit cyclist hang-out—the bar stools are made from chrome rims, vintage bikes hang from the ceiling, and there are specials for messengers on Mondays—it's a theme restaurant that doesn't feel precious or pretentious in any way. The food is cheap and vegetarian friendly: most entrees are under \$10, and the only meat option is fish. The chefs don't do anything flashy, but they do a little bit of everything and do it well. For appetizers the samosas with tamarind chutney are on par with any you'd find on Devon, and the stuffed mushroom caps—roasted baby 'bellos filled with soybeans, pine nuts, and rosemary—are exceptional. The West African ground nut stew, a hearty mix of sweet potato, zucchini, and kale served over brown rice and garnished with peanuts and toasted coconut, is tailor-made for Chicago winters, as are the black beans maduro, served with mounds of fried plantain and a slow-burning chipotle-tomato sauce. They also do a bang-up job with comfort food: the short list of seitan and tofu sandwiches come with coleslaw and a variety of sides, including a respectable vegetarian version of southern collard greens and a totally addictive smoked Gouda mac 'n' cheese I'll crave on my deathbed. **David Wilcox**

Hot Doug's

3324 N. California | 773-279-9550

F 8.7 | S 8.2 | A 8.2 | \$ (11 REPORTS)
AMERICAN | LUNCH: MONDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED
SUNDAY | RESERVATIONS NOT ACCEPTED | CASH
ONLY

YYY Last year Doug Sohn, the Crown Prince of Tube Steak, reopened his wildly successful emporium along a barren stretch of California Avenue, and most afternoons people still line up out the door for his Polishes, brats, Thuringers, andouille sausages, and Chicago-style dogs, dressed and cooked to customer preference—whether char-grilled, deep-fried, steamed, or fried then grilled. There are daily gourmet specials and a "game of the week" sausage—gator, boar, rattlesnake, rabbit, duck, or kangaroo. Fridays and Saturdays fresh-cut fries are cooked in duck fat, and the only request Sohn will refuse is to smother them in cheese sauce. Sausage-wise he's now expanded, offering plated dishes like cassoulet and sausage chili as well. Sohn has duplicated the goofy decor of the old place, chockablock with Elvibilia and hot-dog-related kitsch. The new space is roomier, with outdoor seating in warm weather, and there's plenty of street parking. **Mike Sula**

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Kaze Sushi

2032 W. Roscoe | 773-327-4860

F 8.4 | S 9.3 | A 8.9 | \$\$ (9 REPORTS)
ASIAN, JAPANESE | DINNER: SEVEN DAYS

ЯЯЯ The menu at Kaze, a Roscoe Village sushi place whose name is Japanese for *wind*, changes with the seasons. Executive chef Macku Chan (Heat) strives for originality, but often at the price of clarity and taste. Pieces of amberjack, snapper, and salmon were topped with the likes of foie gras, pine nuts, and banana peppers; the seafood chowder was topped with toasted marshmallows. There's a place for sweetness in Japanese food, but in moderation: when a beautiful fillet of Atlantic black cod comes on a perfectly cooked bed of baby bok choy, does it need to be dressed with bittersweet chocolate and garnished with almond crunch and raspberries? When Chan restrains his overactive imagination he excels: his individual nigiri are fresh as can be and his maki expertly rolled. The room is green and gold and furnished with plush Louis XIV-style chairs. There's a shimmering backlit sushi bar with fresh grass growing around the edges and a soothing Japanese rock garden in the front lounge. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Kevin

9 W. Hubbard | 312-595-0055

F 9.0 | S 8.6 | A 8.2 | \$\$\$\$ (18 REPORTS)
ASIAN, GLOBAL/FUSION/ELECTIC | LUNCH: MONDAY-FRIDAY; DINNER: MONDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED SUNDAY

ЯЯЯ There's something faintly nostalgic about Asian fusion cuisine, which flourished during the late 20th century at places like Yoshi's, where Kevin Shikami once worked. He carries the torch at his eponymous restaurant with appetizers like his signature tuna tartare and a luscious moo shu pancake filled with oxtail and foie gras, the forbidden organ. With this megacaloric starter we had an outstanding glass of wine: a GraEagle Red Wing with an unexpectedly buttery nose and deep, tangy herbal notes (one glass is a stiff \$14). Many fungi found their way onto our plates, as did ginger, star anise, and other things Asian. I had the pork three ways; loin, belly, and shoulder plopped atop fiercely red and smoky Bhutanese rice. My partner had the duck three ways—breast, confit, and duck prosciutto mixed with cubed root vegetables and goat cheese. After all this great grub a fitting finale was a modest sorbet done—how else?—three ways (mango, cherry, and white peach). Our server was friendly, attentive, and clueless; the room, with its earth tones and brushed metal curves, is gorgeous. **David Hammond**

Le Lan

749 N. Clark | 312-280-9100

F 9.3 | S 9.3 | A 9.0 | \$\$\$ (6 REPORTS)
ASIAN, VIETNAMESE, FRENCH | DINNER: MONDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED SUNDAY | OPEN LATE: FRIDAY & SATURDAY TILL 11

ЯЯЯ The dream team—Roland Liccioni of Le Francais and Arun Sampanthavivat of Arun's—collaborated on this French-Asian destination in River North. The room, designed in large part by Sampanthavivat, has jade tile floors, a dark walnut bar, and a

**Los Nopales, North Pond, Graham Elliot Bowles at Avenues**

mural of an elaborate dragon, painted by Arun's brother Anawat, on the back wall. All the food is created with exquisite attention to detail: a sweet corn soup is poured onto a fresh oyster, then topped with heirloom tomato salad; a *banh cuon* (dumpling) is filled with tender organic pork and served with fresh herbs and *nuoc cham* (fish sauce). Further down the menu are dishes like grilled bass with water chestnuts, wild mushrooms, bulgar, grapefruit, and heart of palm salad, and an Asian-spiced beef tenderloin in a star anise and red wine sauce, served with beans, bok choy, and red and black quinoa. Desserts like chocolate banana tart and lemon verbena ice cream are worth saving room for. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Lula Cafe

2537 N. Kedzie | 773-489-9554

F 8.5 | S 7.5 | A 7.8 | \$ (40 REPORTS)
GLOBAL/FUSION/ELECTIC | BREAKFAST, LUNCH, DINNER: SUNDAY, MONDAY, WEDNESDAY-SATURDAY; SATURDAY & SUNDAY BRUNCH | CLOSED TUESDAY | OPEN LATE: FRIDAY & SATURDAY TILL 11 | RESERVATIONS NOT ACCEPTED

ЯЯЯ At this point I've taken dozens of people

to Lula Cafe, and I don't say this lightly: it may be the best neighborhood restaurant in Chicago. One side of the menu is dedicated to cheap, surprising, delicious entrees in the \$6-\$12 range, like the Moroccan tagine: warm cinnamon chickpea stew with chunks of sweet potato over couscous, with fresh greens strewn on top. The Tineka sandwich is—of all things—a spicy peanut butter sandwich with cukes and red onion and lots of other veggies, plus something they call "Indonesian sweet soy sauce." There's beet bruschetta, and peanut sesame noodles, and a great roast turkey sandwich. Appetizers include a shiitake-spinach quesadilla and vegetarian maki. Then there's a more expensive menu (\$12-\$24), as if the owners just thought, "What the hell, this'll be fun too." These items change constantly but have included a scallops appetizer that makes vegetarians very sad to be vegetarians, a roast leg of lamb with sherry-braised mission figs and cipollini onions, and an ocean trout served with brandade-stuffed peppers. I brought a friend who's a professional chef in New York, and he stuck around for hours to order nearly everything on the menu. And then we came back the next night. **Ira Glass**

Manny's Coffee Shop & Deli

1141 S. Jefferson | 312-939-2855

F 8.5 | S 7.6 | A 6.4 | \$ (5 REPORTS)
AMERICAN, KOSHER/JEWISH/DELI | BREAKFAST, LUNCH: MONDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED SUNDAY | RESERVATIONS NOT ACCEPTED

ЯЯЯ Some things are never as good as they used to be. The delis of yesteryear were palaces, serving sliced meat a mile high for \$1.98. Now? At Manny's the latkes are very good, light and crisp, fluffy and flavorful—you don't need a side of apple sauce to enjoy. But you should have had them before! They were potato ambrosia, splendor in the grease. And these prices: \$9.95 for a sandwich in a cafeteria? A strange one too: instead of paying at the end of the line like G-d intended, you pay on the way out, after you eat. But Manny's has been here since 1942, and they know what they're doing. They serve brisket, roast beef, corned beef, very lean, and pastrami, fatty in all the right places, piled high on rye. Too high! How are you supposed to eat all this? So share or get a doggie bag. What else are you going to order at a place like Manny's—a veggie burger? And look, they have all the condiments

right on the table, mustard in both colors, your salt, your pepper, sugar and ketchup, a napkin holder, very useful. Years ago all the big shots ate here; now it's all hoi polloi. But you can still get a cigar at the register, a piece of candy, some gum, your choice of Tums or Roloids. See, at Manny's they know what they're doing. **Jeffrey Felshman**

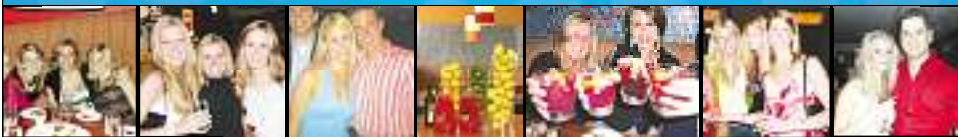
Merlo Ristorante

2638 N. Lincoln | 773-529-0747

F 7.8 | S 7.6 | A 8.2 | \$\$\$ (11 REPORTS)
ITALIAN | DINNER: SEVEN DAYS

ЯЯЯ This subdued Bolognese dining room is run by the Sassi family—Giampaolo Sassi manages the house while his wife, Silvia Marani, creates the menu. They abide by slow food principles, supporting artisanal producers and using mostly seasonal products. Preparations are straightforward. A starter of *tarta di carciofi* is a flaky pastry filled with artichoke, mortadella, and Parmesan. The pasta is all homemade, including the green spinach noodles used in the classic lasagne verdi alla Bolognese. There's also tagliatelle al ragu Bolognese and a wonderfully earthy tortelloni with

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porcinis. A broad array of Italian wines complement the dishes. Marani's desserts are worth the calories: her panna cotta drizzled with homemade caramel is top-notch. The service is gracious and the room calm. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

MK

868 N. Franklin | 312-482-9179

F 8.7 | S 8.6 | A 8.4 | \$\$\$\$ (22 REPORTS)
AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY/REGIONAL | DINNER:
SEVEN DAYS | OPEN LATE: FRIDAY & SATURDAY
TILL 11

YYY Michael Kornick himself has moseyed on to other projects, but things at his namesake roll on smoothly under executive chef Todd Stein. God is in the details at this urbane space: tart cherries in a Manhattan were obviously preserved in-house; a salad of arugula and shaved fennel was elevated by Humboldt Fog goat cheese and a happy marriage with a zippy New Zealand sauvignon blanc. Seared Hudson Valley foie gras served with a lemon-date compote left me indifferent to the idea of a ban on the stuff, and I also failed to be moved by the pommes frites with truffle cream—almost every table in the joint was decked with a little brown paper sack of them, but I'd take the fries at Hot Dog's over these. Entrees are where Stein really shows his artful simplicity: pan-roasted arctic char was perfectly cooked and paired beautifully with beluga lentils, braised greens, and a cardamom-infused carrot puree, and that's just one of five fish dishes. Roasted and grilled meat options round out the contemporary American menu; MK is decidedly not the place for vegetarians. Kate Neumann's desserts keep up the cutesy tradition of former pastry chef Mindy Segal: One Banana, Two Banana Foster is banana brioche bread pudding with warm bananas, vanilla ice cream, and rum butterscotch, and predictably there's a Cake and Shake—I'd rather go with a selection of artisanal cheeses. We finished up with a \$14 Armagnac worth perhaps half the price. In fact, that's MK in a nutshell: just fine if you're happy paying \$42 for a steak. Me, I'd like more bang for my hundred bucks. **Kate Schmidt**

Nacional 27

325 W. Huron | 312-664-2727

F 9.2 | S 8.8 | A 9.0 | \$\$\$ (16 REPORTS)
LATIN AMERICAN, CARIBBEAN | DINNER:
MONDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED SUNDAY

YYY Lettuce Entertain You fuses the cuisines of 27 Latin American and Caribbean nations. Chef Randy Zweiban, a disciple of Norman Van Aken, the master of this "New World cuisine" in Miami, uses ingredients like plantains, chorizo, yuca, and chipotle chiles in creative and visually appealing ways. Mango, passion fruit, and blood oranges appear in light, fresh desserts; drink selections run the gamut from Brazilian caipirinhas to Cuban mojitos to Peruvian pisco sours, all of which pack a punch. There's also a wide selection of wines by the glass. Staff are knowledgeable and aim to please, but if you want to eat in peace, best finish before 11 PM on weekends, when the center of the room is transformed into a pulsing dance floor with a DJ spinning merengue and salsa. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Les Nomades

222 E. Ontario | 312-649-9010

F 9.9 | S 9.7 | A 9.7 | \$\$\$\$\$ (7 REPORTS)
FRENCH | DINNER: TUESDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED
SUNDAY, MONDAY

YYY Under chef Chris Nugent (Betise, MK, Park Avenue Cafe), this is still the best fine restaurant in Chicago, its traditional tone

marked by refined sauces, decadent ingredients in intricate flavor combinations, and gorgeous plate presentations. Nugent's duck consomme is clear as day, with concentrated, rich duck flavor, and decorated with diced carrots and mushrooms. In another dish, two diver scallops are served with thin-sliced seared veal cheeks, cauliflower *mousseline* (pureed cauliflower and cream whipped until airy), and a drizzle of mustard oil. Glistening yellow and red beets and juicy orange sections are gently tossed in a citrus balsamic vinaigrette and served with rich goat cheese quenelles. Roasted veal tenderloin and crispy veal sweetbreads are accompanied by al dente wild mushroom risotto and wilted Swiss chard, all in a *perigieux* sauce (a veal stock reduction with truffles). The wine list is broad in terms of variety, vintage, and price, and it's served by attentive waiters who've mastered pairing. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Los Nopales

4544 N. Western | 773-334-3149

F 8.3 | S 8.6 | A 6.0 | \$\$\$ (7 REPORTS)
MEXICAN/SOUTHWESTERN | LUNCH, DINNER:
SUNDAY, TUESDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED MONDAY |
RESERVATIONS ACCEPTED FOR LARGE GROUPS
ONLY | BYO

YYY At \$1.50 each, the grilled tilapia tacos at this low-key, attractive space are so good, so bright and fresh, it seems like you're stealing. Tangy seiche with tilapia and shrimp has a splash of orange juice, which adds an appealing sweet aftertaste; tortilla chips are made in-house and come served with two salsas, one made of tomatillos blended with avocado, making it creamier than the standard green sauce, the other a thick, spicy combination of chile de arbol and fruit. On a recent visit my entree was grilled pork tenderloin with an aromatic sauce flavored with guajillo and chili de arbol and a side of cactus salad (*nopales* means "prickly pears"). We finished with a sweet, rich coffee flan, a special, one of the exceptionally friendly owners told us—the chef, her husband, is constantly experimenting. That's the kind of thing you'd expect at a place far more swank; to find it in a modest storefront is beguiling. **Chip Dudley**

North Pond

2610 N. Cannon | 773-477-5845

F 9.0 | S 8.4 | A 9.4 | \$\$\$\$ (28 REPORTS)
AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY/REGIONAL | DINNER:
SUNDAY, TUESDAY-SATURDAY; SUNDAY BRUNCH |
CLOSED MONDAY

YYY At North Pond, along with the menu, diners are given the mantra of the modern sustainably minded restaurant: the ingredients, whenever possible, are locally sourced and organic and you will love them; the chef has close partnerships with area farmers and you will benefit. On the first page of the menu you're directed to the Web sites of relevant nonprofits. Chef Bruce Sherman isn't shy about his principles, and it's hard to eat here and conclude that he's wrong. The quality of his ingredients is evident in the meat: the farm-raised venison, braised for the leg and roasted rare for the chops, will win the animal converts—its flavor is deep and persuasive, never gamy, and perfect with a red-wine-poached pear. The duck breast, cooked sous-*vide* (the slow-poached plastic bag method) is gloriously fatty, and the consomme it sits in is even richer. But North Pond isn't the blandly well-meaning restaurant that its rhetoric might suggest: the cooking's surprisingly adventurous. A slice of foie gras was matched with an equally rich cream parfait topped with huckleberries; with mache on the side, the dish could be seen as a clever synecdoche for an

entire dinner. The duck's accompanied by a bowl of cardoon *bagna cauda* (a garlic-anchovy sauce); the venison sits alongside a coffee reduction. Dessert's wonderfully screwy: a white chocolate and coconut soup with scoops of key lime cream and mojito sorbet in the middle. The tastes clash, then meld together. Eating it feels like playing a new video game—by the time you finish, you feel like you're mastering it. **Nicholas Day**

One Sixty Blue

1400 W. Randolph | 312-850-0303

F 9.1 | S 7.9 | A 8.7 | \$\$\$ (14 REPORTS)
AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY/REGIONAL | DINNER:
MONDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED SUNDAY | OPEN
LATE: FRIDAY & SATURDAY TILL 11

YYY On a recent visit to this sleek spot on the western end of the Randolph restaurant corridor, our enthusiastic Aussie waiter recommended a warm goat cheese starter with rosemary, olives, and roasted gold beets—he'd been making it at home, he said, snacking on it while he watched basketball. He was right about the goat cheese; not so much when it came to a toothless asparagus salad. But meaty diver scallops were well matched by pancetta and a tender pile of chanterelles, butternut squash, and leeks, and a delicately fried grouper fillet swam in a foam-topped puddle of carrot puree surrounded by carrots and crisp parsnips—a wonderful bouquet of flavors and textures. Only the Delmonico steak, the restaurant's much-ballyhooed signature dish (Michael Jordan's favorite) disappointed, literally collapsing from the weight of my knife. At dessert a simple scoop of chocolate sorbet upstaged the pear tart it was meant to complement; a dazzling black-and-white creme brulee was undermined by a runny top layer of chocolate mousse. Still, the meal was pleasant and the ambience surprisingly soothing. Then the check came. **Peter Margasak**

Pauline's

1754 W. Balmoral | 773-561-8573

F 7.4 | S 8.0 | A 8.4 | \$ (5 REPORTS)
AMERICAN | BREAKFAST, LUNCH: SEVEN DAYS |
CASH ONLY

YYY Waiting for a table at Pauline's on a weekend morning can be a highly directed experience. "Guys, I need you to sit right here," a host says, manhandling patrons toward a red vinyl bench in the entryway. He makes up for it by handing out Dixie cups of fresh orange juice. Diners can also dip into an enormous tub of Dum-Dum suckers while they watch pancakes bubble and swell on the grill. The wait is always worth it: Pauline's combines the pleasures of an old-fashioned diner—five-egg omelets, lumberjack specials—with more sophisticated dishes such as "le toast etouffee" (bread pudding dipped in French toast batter). The "pancake trifecta" features one each of blueberry, banana, and strawberry—the fruit is stirred into the batter to create a thick, lacy-edged pancake studded with pockets of warm, sweet pulp. Service is fast and polite; the decor is cheerfully random (old Coca-Cola signs, Nagel posters, plastic tablecloths). Plus Pauline's is open from 7 AM to 3 PM every day of the year. Its only failing: no waffles. What the hell? **Anne Ford**

Pier 5736

5736 N. Elston | 773-774-3663

F 8.5 | S 9.2 | A 6.4 | \$\$\$ (5 REPORTS)
SEAFOOD | DINNER: SUNDAY, TUESDAY-SATURDAY |
CLOSED MONDAY

A modest family place where people smile at one another table to table, Pier 5736 has an exceptionally gregarious chef-owner and

a dizzying number of money-saving offers: five entrees available for just \$10 on Tuesdays and Sundays, and specials chalked up every night of the week. There are a few meat selections on the menu—steak and ribs and hamburgers—but here fish rules. Many specials and fancier dishes come in around \$18, but the smart strategy is probably to order the more reasonably priced weekly or daily specials; for instance, a blackened catfish dinner for \$10.95. Lobster medallions were dressed in a white wine sauce with lemon butter and parsley; crab cakes, with a good balance of meat and breading, come with a flavorful remoulade. The pan-seared halibut was well prepared, flaky and tender. I saw opah, an unfamiliar fish, among the specials and gave it a shot—I suspect it's one of those species that used to get thrown back, and as far as I'm concerned it still belongs overboard. Every dish comes with a salad, vegetable, and potato, all nicely done if somewhat uneventful, and there's a full bar and a dozen or so bottles of wine, most in the \$20 range. For dessert we went with an airy chocolate mousse, which was comfortably priced at \$4.50. As we were getting ready to go our cheerful server signed me up for a drawing to win a free meal. Seafood bargains are what you get here. **David Hammond**

Rick's Cafe Casablanca

3915 N. Sheridan | 773-327-1972

F 8.7 | S 8.4 | A 8.6 | \$\$\$ (14 REPORTS)
FRENCH, ITALIAN, TAPAS/SPANISH | DINNER:
SUNDAY, TUESDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED MONDAY |
BYO

YYY Eating under the glare of a larger-than-life-sized portrait of Humphrey Bogart doesn't sound classy, but the mural at Rick's Cafe Casablanca goes well with the sensual French, Italian, and Spanish food. Few plates here are over \$20, but everything looks and tastes opulent. The mashed potatoes that come with most steaks are savory and artful, scored to resemble a white chocolate bar. But the sauces are the real treat, and the beef seems to be cut in proportion to the richness of the sauce it's paired with: cream sauce is poured over a small piece, while a larger slab's covered with a vinaigrette reduction. Lamb is lean and flavorful, fresh linguine with seafood is mouthwatering, and appetizers like moules marinieres and soupe d'aignon are worth stretching out a meal for (don't come here if you aren't ready to wait for good food). The rest of the small room is as smooth and dark as Bogart, though friendlier. It's BYO, and there's a liquor store across the street, under the Sheridan Red Line stop. **Ann Sterzinger**

Roy's

720 N. State | 312-787-7599

F 9.2 | S 8.4 | A 7.9 | \$\$\$\$ (18 REPORTS)
GLOBAL/FUSION/ECCLECTIC | DINNER: SEVEN
DAYS

YYY Classically trained chef Roy Yamaguchi opened his first namesake restaurant in Honolulu in 1988, serving a style of cuisine he called Hawaiian fusion; now his chain has scores of locations. This branch, located in a 6,500-square-foot room that seats more than 200, features 20-foot vaulted ceilings, floor-to-ceiling windows, crimson walls hung with striking modern prints, and a central exhibition kitchen crowded with the largest culinary staff I've ever seen. But the quality of the service and the food help to make up for the frenzied atmosphere and the overwhelming scale. Roy's Canoe Appetizer for Two (\$25) includes a few of his most popular specialties: coconut-crusted tiger shrimp, jalapeno gyoza, teriyaki-

grilled beef satay, and goat cheese and portobello ravioli. For entrees there are several seafood options, like delicate misoyaki butterfish in a ginger-wasabi-cilantro cream sauce, plus a handful of red-meat dishes. A good choice for sampling is the mixed plate, which changes regularly; it might combine honey-mustard short ribs and butterfish or blackened ahi and lemongrass-crusted *shutome* (Hawaiian swordfish) in a Thai peanut-basil sauce. The wine list is outstanding, with close to a dozen hard-to-find offerings by the glass and several bottles specially labeled for Roy's. Service is attentive and cheerful, although all the *alohas* get a bit silly. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Sabatino's

4441 W. Irving Park | 773-283-8331

F 8.0 | S 7.8 | A 7.0 | \$\$ (10 REPORTS)
ITALIAN | LUNCH: MONDAY-FRIDAY; DINNER:
SEVEN DAYS | OPEN LATE: FRIDAY & SATURDAY
TILL 12:30, WEDNESDAY TILL MIDNIGHT, MONDAY,
TUESDAY, THURSDAY TILL 11:30

YYY Tuxedo-clad hosts, strolling musicians, no-nonsense pours at the convivial bar—Sabatino's old-school Italian-American appeal is universal, as evidenced by the happy throngs. Warm, crusty loaves and addictive pizza bread come to the table in a blink of an eye, though go cautiously—dinners include soup (stracciatella with spinach is a favorite) and salad. Terrific starters include garlicky shrimp de jonghe (a Chicago original), textbook baked clams, and *bresaola*, razor-thin air-cured beef with arugula and Parmigiano Reggiano. Pastas range from spaghetti with Angelo's special meat sauce to *zuppa di mare*, a lovely mix of lobster, scallops, shrimp, clams, and mussels in a light tomato sauce with linguine. For secondi fresh fish, simply prepared, or veal, in particular veal saltimbocca, are good choices; me, I hit the classics, chicken Vesuvio, a veal chop, or thick-cut New York strip. Flaming table-side desserts, quickly becoming a lost art, are a specialty; here are anachronistic delights like baked Alaska and cherries jubilee. The interesting wine list ranges from damn reasonable to three rings and more (the ancient cash register totes a maximum of \$45 at a time), and that's not to mention the veteran waitstaff, complimentary valet parking, Wednesday lobster special, and sing-along piano player on weekends. **Gary Wiviott**

Scylla

1952 N. Damen | 773-227-2995

F 9.6 | S 8.7 | A 8.7 | \$\$\$ (6 REPORTS)
MEDITERRANEAN, EUROPEAN | DINNER: SUNDAY,
TUESDAY-SATURDAY; SUNDAY BRUNCH | CLOSED
MONDAY

YYY Chef Stephanie Izard, a vet of Spring and La Tache, executes the ambitious menu here with expertise. Crisp sauteed veal sweetbreads done Mediterranean style with braised greens, sweet currants, and toasted pine nuts made an impressive first course; the grilled baby octopus salad, full of arugula and mint leaves, tasted green and fresh, though the octopus was a bit chewy. The celeriac soup was decadently creamy and perfectly smooth. Izard serves whatever fish is fresh; one evening it was Hawaiian ono, which came to the table topped with a salty *brandade* (whipped-potato-and-salt-cod spread) and surrounded by a medley of colors, flavors, and textures: slightly charred roasted brussels sprouts, earthy wild mushrooms, tart dried cherries, and crunchy almonds. The skate wing was encrusted in crispy dried potato flakes, marked with a zigzag of spicy tomato

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aioli, and set on a big pile of charred radicchio, seared calamari, grape tomatoes, capers, and a few too many garbanzo beans. Portions are ample and priced accordingly—most entrees cost in the low-to-mid-20s. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Seasons Restaurant

120 E. Delaware | 312-649-2349

F 9.0 | S 10.0 | A 9.1 | \$\$\$\$ (7 REPORTS)
GLOBAL/FUSION/ELECTIC | BREAKFAST, LUNCH, DINNER: MONDAY-SATURDAY; SUNDAY BRUNCH

ЯЯЯ This old-world dining room, adjacent to the seventh-floor lobby of the Four Seasons Hotel, is predictably luxurious, with oak paneling, grandiose chandeliers, and huge vases of fresh-cut flowers everywhere. The tables are beautifully appointed with oversize Wedgwood china and gorgeous stemware, setting the stage for an elegant affair. The pricey French-influenced menu changes seasonally (the tasting menu daily); braised beef cheeks, cassoulet of lobster, and Brittany scallops served in the shell are regular offerings. Straightforward contemporary American dishes (of which there are few) might include lemon-and-garlic roasted chicken with rosemary potatoes or a lamb trio (chop, loin, and shank). An adorable children's menu lists favorites like PB&J and chocolate chip cookies. Raters praise the Sunday brunch buffet in particular: for \$60 you get to choose from a staggering selection: grilled-nectarine and goat cheese salad, pepper-crust ahi tuna, basil-crust rack of lamb, grilled quail breast, chicken Parmesan, a Mongolian beef stir-fry, custom-made omelets and waffles, ricotta blintzes, fruit, yogurt, and about a million other hot and cold items. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Spiaggia

980 N. Michigan | 312-280-2750

F 9.4 | S 9.4 | A 9.2 | \$\$\$\$ (10 REPORTS)
ITALIAN | DINNER: SEVEN DAYS

ЯЯЯ Whoever says people don't dress for dinner anymore hasn't been to Spiaggia lately. The room, with a stunning view of Lake Michigan from 40-foot picture windows, is perfectly appointed, and so are the guests, which is only fitting at a place in the running (along with Everest) for a James Beard award as the country's outstanding restaurant. From the moment our amuse arrived, though, it was the table that held our attention. Chef Tony Mantuano offers tasting menus, but on this visit we went full bore and ordered a la carte, starting with sea scallops paired with Italian lentils and cotechino sausage; a trio of pesce cruda that included a stand-out sea bass tartare flavored with pistachio and orange; and surprisingly delicate house-marinated anchovies with buffalo mozzarella. Pasta here, as one might expect, is terrific: handmade spaghetti alla chitarra (so-called because it resembles guitar strings) came with sweet lobster, spring garlic, dried tomatoes, and arugula; squid ink and saffron spaghetti with surprisingly meaty Dover sole and baby fennel fronds. The star, however, was gnocchi with ricotta and black truffle sauce—no wonder Mantuano is known for his truffle tasting menus. Our entrees included a wood-grilled veal chop nicely complemented by a ruby red Veronese Campo Buri, but it was the grilled pork loin, served with tender braised pork cheek, morels, ramps, a chunk of guanciale, and creamy polenta,

that won me over. The dish was so damn good I felt a sense of abandonment when they took the plate away. Desserts—an intense chocolate semifreddo and mouth-puckering lemon panna cotta—were grand, but Spiaggia's cheese program is second to none, with superior offerings like a signature aged cow's milk cheese and a cow-and-sheep's-milk cheese made with grape must and grape seeds, which crunch under your teeth. Service is seamless, professional, and well-informed; and Denise Beckman, who's replaced longtime sommelier Henry Bishop, did right by us with a sparkling Gavi di Gavi to start the extravaganza. **Gary Wiviott**

Spring

2039 W. North | 773-395-7100

F 9.1 | S 8.7 | A 8.7 | \$\$\$ (30 REPORTS)
AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY/REGIONAL, SEAFOOD | DINNER: SUNDAY, TUESDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED MONDAY

ЯЯЯ Spring doesn't just have seafood. At the very end of the entree list—past the black bass, monkfish, arctic char, and all that's tartared and sashimied—there's chicken and beef rib eye. Like a children's menu, the meat's there for those diners who refuse to eat their sea bream. They're fools. The first restaurant venture of executive chef Shawn McClain, now the overlord of a mini empire that includes Green Zebra and Custom House, Spring's a half-decade old and still fresh. The concept's simple: clean, clever Asian-influenced seafood dishes. The flavor of the fish is usually kept pure; the corruption's confined to the splendid sides and sauces. The meaty monkfish sits on top of pork belly, which it hints at in texture, and a rich sunchoke puree; golden tilefish, soft and plain, is livened up by peekytoe crab wontons and a grassy broth that's like a garden distilled. Alongside the raw fish appetizers there's also "charred sashimi of beef 'pho,'" a few thin slices of marvelously sweet raw beef, singed on the edges. Potato "ravioli" test the structural stability of potatoes, but the single seared scallop that accompanies it is pristine and the pungent mushroom reduction is the perfect foil, like a gastronomic good cop-bad cop routine. Dessert's smart and light on the tongue, especially lemon mousse with hibiscus sorbet and rosewater foam. From the street Spring offers a nearly pornographic depiction of fine dining: passersby on North Avenue can gaze down the length of the seemingly serene dining room, originally the pool area of a bathhouse. Inside, however, the space is narrower and more enclosed than it appears—the noise of the crowd, and the music, can climb. **Nicholas Day**

Sweets & Savories

1534 W. Fullerton | 773-281-6778

F 8.9 | S 9.7 | A 8.3 | \$\$\$ (6 REPORTS)
AMERICAN, FRENCH | LUNCH: FRIDAY; DINNER: SEVEN DAYS; SUNDAY BRUNCH

ЯЯЯ A Francophile's enabler, situated between a Pennzoil and a taqueria on a dilapidated stretch of West Fullerton, Sweets & Savories delivers occasionally overwrought riffs on haute cuisine—a \$17 burger (\$10 on Wednesdays), for example, with foie gras, truffled mayonnaise, and endive—in a nearly pretension-free setting (every Saturday chef David Richards sends baskets of food over to the Pennzoil in exchange for sharing a parking lot with the restaurant). Richards's menu changes fre-

quently; on the night I was there appetizers ranged from a seared foie gras served with cantaloupe and mango gelee to an unusual, terrific tart with Roquefort, lavender-raisin compote, and fresh cream. Soups and salads are good if familiar—French onion, vichyssoise, lyonnaise—but the entrees really shine: the salmon en papillote, with rosemary sprigs and roasted potatoes, was delicately succulent, and the smoked-bacon-and-fontina quiche was perfectly rich in flavor and texture. Sweets come in with a changing, ten-item-strong menu of homemade treats that are ends in themselves—toffee bread pudding, lemon-curd tart, warm Belgian fondant cake with Scharffen Berger cocoa sorbet. There's a prix fixe Sunday brunch (\$16), which, by the looks of the menu, ought to be a delicious if nod-inducing feast before a matinee at Facets across the street. No corkage fees on Monday. **Ulysses Smith**

Tank Sushi

4514 N. Lincoln | 773-769-2600

F 8.7 | S 7.9 | A 6.6 | \$\$\$ (19 REPORTS)
JAPANESE | LUNCH: SATURDAY-SUNDAY; DINNER: SEVEN DAYS | OPEN LATE: FRIDAY & SATURDAY TILL 11:30

ЯЯЯ Tank's formula—sleek contemporary space, clubby background music, signature cocktails—has been done before. But a year after opening, it was packed on a Tuesday night, and it still feels welcoming and casual enough for the neighborhood folks and hippsters. Many of the sushi combinations nod to tropical climes: the Green Island roll comes with spicy coconut mayonnaise, the Tropic Thunder is adorned with a thin slice of mango, the Latin Heat (superwhite tuna and smoked salmon with avocado) sports cilantro and a healthy slice of jalapeno. We loved the Ocean Sundae roll (shrimp tempura, cream cheese, avocado, and an embarrassment of sauces, mayos, and other adornments), with its combination of sweet and spicy flavors and creamy and crunchy textures. The maki menu also features an unusual number of vegetarian rolls including *kampyo*, marinated gourd with sesame seeds, and a shiitake roll with sweet ginger soy and sesame seeds. The veggie tempura roll was a disappointment—there wasn't a crumb of tempura crunch in sight. We fared better with the avocado tempura roll, with silky avocado, asparagus, and daikon sprouts, though we couldn't find the tempura here either. **Kathie Bergquist**

Tom Yum Thai & Japanese Cuisine

3232 W. Foster | 773-442-8100

F 8.9 | S 9.6 | A 7.6 | \$ (5 REPORTS)
ASIAN, THAI, JAPANESE | LUNCH: MONDAY-FRIDAY; DINNER: SEVEN DAYS | BYO

ЯЯЯ We didn't know what to make of this place at first. The room had leather booths, sheer fabric thumbtacked to the ceiling above Christmas lights in the windows, and, strangest of all, a large, shiny motorcycle parked just inside the front door. But our server took our orders promptly and zipped back with our appetizers and entrees before we had a chance to ponder its significance. The menu is of the something-for-everyone variety, with a wide sampling of tried-and-true Thai, Chinese, and sushi selections and a good number of vegetarian options. Servings of crab Rangoon, "crispy delight" prawns, and pot stickers were a bit greasy, nothing out of the ordinary. *Shu shi pla*—a lightly panfried

red snapper atop romaine leaves and bathed in a red curry sauce—went over well, as did the *pad sie mao*, mixed vegetables in a classic bean sauce; it was just spicy enough, though a dish of Thai red curry with chicken could've stood a kick. The most pleasing part of the evening might have been the check: prices here are very reasonable, which may explain Tom Yum's popularity with Raters. **Susannah J. Felts**

Trattoria No. 10

10 N. Dearborn | 312-984-1718

F 8.4 | S 8.5 | A 7.6 | \$\$\$ (15 REPORTS)
ITALIAN | LUNCH: MONDAY-FRIDAY; DINNER: MONDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED SUNDAY

ЯЯЯ At Trattoria No. 10 the receipts alone—imprinted with the slogan "Trattoria No. 10 is perfect for business"—make it clear that this isn't a place with an identity crisis. A rare decent dinner option in the Loop (it's hidden beneath Dearborn in a faux-Italian grotto), its tables are always well populated with downtown workers and business travelers. You can see why: service is seamless and unpretentious; the seating's cozy and private; and the prices, while not inexpensive, won't torch an expense account. But if you're out for pleasure you might want to go elsewhere: the food, while dutifully well prepared and reliable, is rarely compelling. A few smaller plates are terrific—the ricotta gnocchi's toothsome, and pancetta-wrapped scallops with strawberries make for a charming pairing of salty and sweet. But, oddly, the pastas can be frustrating: on the current spring menu both the linguine with blue crab and pineapple and the ravioli with asparagus and sun-dried-tomato cream sauce tasted a lot better in print than on the plate. And while pork tenderloin with balsamic caramelized onions was admirably juicy, it wasn't exciting enough to distract anyone from a meeting—which might just be the point. **Nicholas Day**

Tre Kronor

3258 W. Foster | 773-267-9888

F 8.6 | S 8.5 | A 7.5 | \$\$ (20 REPORTS)
SWEDISH, BREAKFAST | BREAKFAST, LUNCH, DINNER: MONDAY-SATURDAY; SUNDAY BRUNCH | BYO

ЯЯЯ Starting at seven every morning, the kitchen at Tre Kronor turns out their legendary Danish, cinnamon rolls, and a number of cheese-filled omelets, each packing enough points to top out your Weight Watchers quota for the day. Most of the foods are of Scandinavian stock, though there's one quising burger on the lunch menu. Herring is perhaps the most predictable of Scandinavian starters, but Tre Kronor's superbly moist and meaty version, made in-house, has a goodness lacking in standard deli varieties. Lunch offerings include quiche and Norwegian meatballs on limpa, wheat bread with deep hints of fennel; Swedish meatballs here are light, delicate, and deliciously dressed with sweet-tart lingonberry sauce. In line with the robust Viking tradition, you won't find a salad here without cheese or bacon or both; the menu is full of the kind of fortifying food you'd want to eat before heading out to herd reindeer or invade your southern neighbors. The fish entrees are mostly of salmon, prepared in a number of ways (smoked, cured in aquavit, and as gravlax) and genuinely superior. Servers in this warm, woody place are exceptionally friendly and informed about the cuisine. It's small, though, so you

might want to make reservations (accepted only on weekdays). Check out the gift store across the street to stock up on clogs, trolls, and high-end versions of Swedish fish candy. **David Hammond**

Tru

676 N. Saint Clair | 312-202-0001

F 8.9 | S 9.2 | A 9.3 | \$\$\$\$ (13 REPORTS)
FRENCH, GLOBAL/FUSION/ELECTIC | DINNER: MONDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED SUNDAY

ЯЯЯ Executive chef Rick Tramanto and executive pastry chef Gale Gand bring equal parts knowledge, experimentation, and whimsy to the table at Tru, where you can choose from wild tasting "collections" (with courses including the famous glass caviar "staircase") or slightly less wild creations prix fixe. On a recent night I was tempted by what I think of as one of Tru's signature dishes, a lobster risotto with saffron (sometimes it's black truffles), served in a shiny individual copper pot with lobster reduction spooned over at the very last moment. Steaming and piping hot, the risotto was perfect—chewy and savory and creamy, the pieces of just-cooked lobster delicate. The meal began with the tiniest of amuse bouches, a circle of braised leek with a salty eggplant concoction in the middle, served on a kind of porringer spoon. Then followed a little peekytoe crab salad, an interesting balance of textures. For my main course, with a glass of Tete Cuvee, I marched back to heartier fare: an extraordinary prime beef rib eye that though accompanied by greens and buttery Robuchon-style mashed potatoes made me feel it was just me and the meat, an ancient tale in a civilized place. My friend and I couldn't resist the cheese course, and despite our daintiest of requests for portion control ("Just the tiniest of slivers, please," "Just the merest mention of Brie"), I think it sent us over the edge—I wish I'd better prepared for the all-out decadence that is dessert at Tru. But it was onward: first an amuse of strawberry lemonade, then a chocolate semifreddo with chocolate Rice Krispies that rocked my world. Meals end with one last spoiled grazing through a selection of small cakes, cookies, and candies, along with a goody bag and a handmade lollipop, a petite green round on a long, long stem. **Elizabeth M. Tamny**

Victory's Banner

2100 W. Roscoe | 773-665-0227

F 8.2 | S 7.8 | A 7.1 | \$ (23 REPORTS)
VEGETARIAN/HEALTHY | BREAKFAST, LUNCH: SUNDAY-MONDAY, WEDNESDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED TUESDAY

ЯЯЯ Victory's Banner is one of the best breakfast houses in Chicago, period; the owner told me he learned how to make his omelets from the immortal Lou Mitchell himself. Satisfaction Promise is a scrambled-egg dish with spinach, sun-dried tomato, and feta. But the killer is the French toast, in a batter made with cream (not milk) and orange marmalade, served with peach butter and real maple syrup. There are also pancakes, waffles, and *uppama* (an Indian hot cereal). Lunch items include homemade soups, salads, and wraps. The restaurant is owned by a student of meditation master Sri Chinmoy, and the menu says that it exists for one reason: to give joy. I think they've succeeded. **Jeff Kolton, Rater**

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