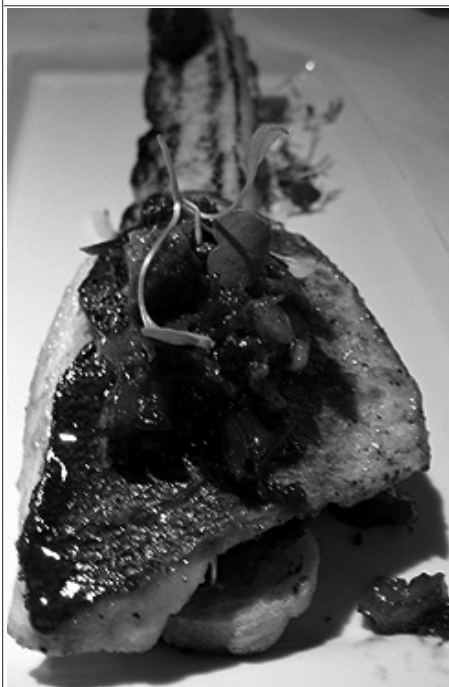


MICHIGAN AVENUE'S GAGE HAS AN IDENTITY CRISIS

## Mercury Falling

By Michael Nagrant



I'VE TAKEN MEASURE OF THE GAGE AND WERE IT A THERMOMETER, the reading is pretty lukewarm. It's surprising because as a critic, I've been about as slow as the Jamaican bobsled team in filing a review on this somewhat new Michigan Avenue restaurant. It opened in April, and everyone from the fleet Time Out to the tortoise-like Phil Vettel has weighed in. Almost all the reviews were overwhelmingly positive.

In fact, walking into the dark, woody and gleaming green ceramic-brick womb of this spot seemed like a *fait accompli*. I didn't even have a review planned, rather I'd just hoped to score some uplifting tavern spirit on a dreary, drizzle-soaked afternoon. As a denizen of the West Loop, I'd really hoped to find a new regular watering hole, a place to park myself for a pint and a tasty bar meal whenever inspiration hit. The Gage is owned by the Lawless family, who among other holdings, own Lincoln Square's Grafton Pub. I've been an ardent fan of their curry fries and burgers, so I figured this would be a great alternative to making the northern trek.

Things started out well. My server was a pretty affable guy, who either had answers about the menu or knew where to get them when we asked. Though he also looked and sounded a lot like Darryl Hammond's Donald Trump impression on *Saturday Night Live*. Every time I looked at his hovering form, I feared he was going to tell me I was fired.

I'd expected increased prices and a measurable uptick in swank from the Grafton. Still the Gage had been billed as best of both worlds, a place to come as you are, but also a place to eat and drink well. In fact, the restaurant's tagline is "refined rusticity." Of course for me, that phrase conjures a rickety north woods cabin with a new hot tub on the deck. The prices seemed extraordinary. Seventeen bucks for fish and chips? The Grafton's flaky golden-fried cod ran \$11. House cocktails were \$12. Wicker Park's Violet Hour, which uses premium liquors, fresh-bar prep, eight kinds of ice and seven types of home-made cocktail bitters, only charges \$11.

Sticker shock can always be remedied by taste. And the scotch egg, a hardboiled egg enrobed in sausage, rolled in bread crumbs, deep fried, topped with hot English mustard and nestled on well-dressed seasonal greens, cured some ills. I'd wondered why Bob Evans and the chicken egg manufacturers hadn't already gotten together to cross-breed pigs and chickens in hopes of creating a monster that could lay these beauties in one step.

The lamb salad, featuring fiery braised shards of vindaloo-spiced meat tossed with spiky frisee, was also inspiring. The luxuriant execution of what is usually a rustic Indian dish made me yearn for a high-end Indian spot ala *Tabla* in New York.

After that, the mercury pretty much dropped. The \$12 namesake house cocktail, featuring Pear Grey Goose, Aperol and clove-infused apple juice with a splash of cranberry and lime, was so overwhelmed by bitter clove notes, it was a bit like drinking potpourri.

The seventeen-dollar fish and chips were under-seasoned and greasy, and a cascade of malt vinegar couldn't save them. Even the chips, which were cut slightly thicker than normal American fries but nowhere near as thick as authentic English chips, were soggy.

Chef Dirk Flanigan's cutesy take on surf and turf, featuring a plank of garlic toast balancing a dollop of bland pesto and ammonia-tinged sea-bream fillet on a nest of braised oxtail, was off-putting. In my life, I've only sent back one item to the kitchen—this dish made it two. How the line cook didn't notice the bad taste and smell during an off-peak time with only three other parties in the dining room was a bit disturbing.

We asked for another fillet of the bream, and to their credit, our server confirmed that the chef was not happy with the quality and substituted halibut cheeks. Tender like crab meat and bathed in lobster butter with jewel like orbs of yellow tomato, we really should have ordered this in the first place. Problematically, when we got the bill, they comped the bream, but added the Halibut, which was a \$1 more. I feel they should have honored the bream price, since that's what I ordered.

I think the Gage has an identity problem. It's stuck between being a homey pub and a high-end restaurant with high-end prices. For the money I'd rather park myself in front of the fireplace at the Grafton on any night for my well-executed pub-grub fix, and let spots like Blackbird or Sepia serve me \$32 lamb chops.

*Gage is located at 24 South Michigan, (312)372-4243*

THE WACO BROTHERS' DEAN SCHLABOWSKE TALKS HIS TASTES

## INDIE WINE

WHEN DEAN SCHLABOWSKE ISN'T ROCKIN' A HONKY TONK WITH THE WACO BROTHERS or belting out a line from "Scrap Truck," a track off the new CD from his other band, Dollar Store, the guitar-playing singer-songwriter can be found at the front counter of a wine store—his wine store.

Located in a downstairs space in a little shopping strip on North Avenue in Bucktown, he opened Cellar Rat Wine Shop at the end of April. He named it after an old slang term given to a candle stand of spiraled metal that wine-cellar workers in Burgundy once used to illuminate their subterranean surroundings. (To see what a cellar rat looks like, check out Schlabowske's latest tat—he had the candle stand indelibly inked on his left forearm a few months ago.)

Although the music did come first—he's been playing clubs since he was 14—Schlabowske's logged some serious time in the wine world, too, including a decade handling French imports for Sam's Wine & Spirits. But he's always wanted to own his own shop, and to infuse it with the same attitude that he brings to his bands. The sign in his window says it all: Corporate Wine Still Sucks.

With music, he says, "huge record labels have to sign acts they know will have max appeal—they can't afford to be on the fringes." Same with wine. "It's not that wineries owned by corporations don't make good wine—they do," he clarifies. "But the mentality about how you make decisions changes, it's all about matching flavor profiles and market shares as opposed to smaller producers who are making wine because they have a passionate belief that wines from this area should taste like this."

Which is why Cellar Rat is stocked with the *crème de la quaint*—independent producers, small wineries, limited productions. Where it gets big is with value. Not only is there a giant table laden with selections priced at \$10 and under, but Schlabowske's expertise, which he offers to everyone who ventures in, guarantees a perfect pairing, regardless of price.

"I want to make the place feel welcoming, not snooty, like you're browsing in a cool record store," Schlabowske says. Next to a funky 1950s lamp, a young couple is carefully comparing two bottles. "Small," he concludes before heading over to help them, "is beautiful." (*Jenny B. Davis*)

*Cellar Rat Wine Shop is located at 1811 West North, (773)489-C-RAT (2728), [www.cellarratchicago.com](http://www.cellarratchicago.com)*