

A NEW SHERIFF'S IN TOWN AT THE RUSH STREET SPOT

Down with the Drawing Room

By Michael Nagrant

At 8:30PM ON A FRIDAY NIGHT, The Drawing Room at Le Passage is kind of a lonely hearts club. There's a six-top of cargo-shorts-wearing sunburned dudes slurping down Coronas. There's a bony bald-headed Nosferatu-like guy in a smart-looking suit making his way through some food. In the opposite corner, an employee, head-to-toe in black sporting a taut ponytail, a "Marked for Death"-era Steven Seagal look-alike, warily scans the room. Finally, there's a lanky, lonely old dude, who with his slicked-back

gray hair, Harry Caray face-engulfing black-rimmed glasses, turquoise nylon windbreaker and Daisy-Duke-length boating shorts looks like a Viagra Triangle Aristotle Onassis.

Clearly he's somebody, a regular or a Gold Coast moneybag, because even though he strolls in twenty minutes after us, he gets his drink first, while our table only an apology from the bartender that we're next. But that's the way it's always been in this canyon under Rush Street: if you're somebody, you get served, and if you're nobody, it's back behind the velvet rope with the herd. At least that's how it was in the Billy Dec days, when his homey David Schwimmer ran free in the VIP Room. Sitting here now, beside white stone columns and under the glinting crystal chandelier, you can almost hear the ghost whispering, "Yo, I'm Ross from 'Friends,' baby. Let's hook up."

And so while the pecking order may not have changed under the new management of Three Headed Productions, I'd heard the food and drink had.

Head mixologist and operations manager, Charles Joly, has created a pretty impressive fresh cocktails list trading on pre-prohibition stalwarts like the Old Fashioned and the Manhattan. When the cocktail cart finally rolled around to our table, mixologist Tim Lacey, formerly of Custom House, spanked basil and shook his shaker until his forearm muscles bulged. All the while, like a sage of the snifter, he dispensed history and etymology with each drink served. Outside of Nacional 27, Sepia, MK and Violet Hour, no one is doing a cocktail program like this. The Japanese Julep, featuring Yamazaki Scotch, ginger simple syrup, yuzu and mint over crushed ice, with its smoky sweet citrus profile, was so good, Churchill Downs should do its Kentucky Derby visitors a service and substitute this for the traditional mint julep.

The only problem with the cocktail service: most of the drinks run an absurd \$14-\$16. I believe in paying for service and the rent surely ain't cheap, but Drawing Room's competition offers the same quality for about \$11 a cocktail. With entrees here, which probably require more expensive ingredients and labor-intensive cooking, running as much as the drinks, the only thing you can really chalk this up to is pure-hubristic marketing-driven gougerie.

Foodwise, another Custom Houser, Shawn McClain, the entrepreneur also behind Spring and Green Zebra, consulted on the original menu, and then sent forth a member of his flock, protégé Nick Lacasse, to execute the vision last November. A few weeks ago, Lacasse had done what Richard, the faux-hawked Wonka and Lisa, the whiny toque, couldn't do in the finale of "Top Chef": he bested Stephanie Izard in a head-to-head cooking competition.

One of the dishes he won with, a seared lobe of foie gras over toasted brioche with pickled fennel and kumquat gastrique, was a perfect prep of duck liver, featuring a palate-encompassing spectrum of sweet, tangy and salty flavors. The only quibble: too much toast, not enough foie.

The best dish of the evening, a sweet-and-hot-spiced Jamaican Jerk Quail with sweet potato and mango salsa had me gnawing the flesh off the bird down to its toothpick-sized bones.

Housemade gnocchi with summer squash and mixed farmers-market veg featured airy caramelized potato pasta nuggets that popped in my mouth like my Polish grandmother's perfect pierogi.

I've always thought I'd never meet a piece of bacon I didn't like, but I was a bit lukewarm on the pork belly here. The "bacon squared" dish was all sweet and molasses and needed some kind of acid. Likewise, the "Fish and Chips," deep-fried golfball-sized salt cod croquettes drizzled with lemon aoli, could have been more aggressively salted.

The dessert list was only two plates strong, but the chocolate-dipped hazelnut ice cream with English toffee was one of the better desserts I've had this year. The savory salty hazelnut ice cream was the perfect foil to the rich chocolate and sweet buttery toffee.

By the end of our meal at 9:30pm, the room was still relatively empty, while just upstairs at Le Colonial people were pouring out the door, fighting tooth and nail for a seat. The Drawing Room, which opens at 6pm, is clearly hampered by its association with the late nights of Le Passage. The lounge stands on its own as a culinary destination and Nick Lacasse is a chef you should know. Joly told me the Drawing Room is planning on dropping the Le Passage name later this year. When they do, folks might just be fighting for tables like they do all around town on a Friday night. And if things get out of order, "Steven Seagal" will be there to regulate.

The Drawing Room, 937 North Rush, (312)255-0022



MUSEUMS

Field Museum

1400 S. Lake Shore (at Roosevelt), (312)922-9410. CELEBRATING WOMEN features multiple photographs by renowned photographer Paola Gianturco. Through Sep 7. → MELTING ICE—A HOT TOPIC: ENVISIONING CHANGE. This small exhibit off the Field's main lobby is easy to walk past. "Melting Ice" occupies a sparse two-room alcove, darkly lit with the muted, cool tones of the arctic tundra. It's a "blink-and-you'll-miss-it" set-up, which is unfortunate, given the project's big, world-changing aspirations. Organized as part of the "Art of the Environment" initiative by the Natural World Museum and the United Nations Environment Program, the exhibit consists of twenty-three pieces from an international cast of artists. Using modern sculpture, video installation, choreography and frank point-and-click photography, the exhibit documents the effects of climate change. Subject matter focuses on the arctic: endangered penguins in Antarctica, Alaskan villages cobbled away by a rising sea, fresh water depletion and collapsing icebergs. Here and there are odd men out, such as Free Range Studios contribution: an idealistic, fictional documentary from fifty years in the future in which massive protests, bio-fuel and a laughable "Obama-McCain" ticket change the course of human history. Saturating the vibe of the entire exhibit is a driving urgency to fire up visitor's attitudes about global warming. This is art-meets-environmental activism, and one can't help but leave feeling invigorated with a renewed desire for change. (Laura Hawbaker) Through Sep 1. → MYTHIC CREATURES: DRAGONS, UNICORNS & MERMAIDS. This latest exhibit at the Field Museum should unleash the imagination of everyone who attends, as "Mythic Creatures: Dragons, Unicorns & Mermaids" delves into the realm of the relative unknown. The exhibit's divided into four sections: land, sea, air and dragons. Every room is beautifully crafted, with a quintessential creature recreated to match each room. In the sea-themed room, the infamous Kraken, a gigantic sea monster that has been featured most recently in "The Pirate of the Caribbean" film series, appears to be coming from the floor of the exhibit room, with its serpentine tentacles winding up towards the ceiling. Mermaids are among the highlighted sea-oriented creatures, as the exhibit contrasts the numerous variations on the myths that range from the familiar to the relative unknown. In the air-creature section, a Roc greets the visitors with its seventeen-foot wingspan and equally massive talons; the room also takes a look at the egasus and a model of the Aepyornis. The latter is a now-extinct bird that was the largest to have ever lived, standing at more than ten feet tall. The kids also have an opportunity to create their own dragon using a touchscreen, if all the nifty models and short films aren't enough. With its wondrous layout, "Mythic Creatures" captures the imagination of all ages by not only making the unreal accessible, but also by allowing the same myths to take on a life of their own. (Thomas Barbee) Through Sep 1. Hours: Daily 9am-5pm. Fees: \$12 adults, \$7 children 4-11, \$7 students & seniors. With Chicago ID: \$10, \$6 children, \$7 students & seniors.

Museum of Science and Industry

57th and Lake Shore, (773)684-1414. → SMART HOME: GREEN + WIRED. The Museum of Science and Industry's latest exhibit is a fully functioning three-story house, the "Smart Home," an ecologically sound building built on the foundation of material, energy and water efficiency. This is

green living gone haywire. Museum guests are ushered through a twenty-minute eye-opening (if somewhat rushed) tour of the house. Every aspect of the building is environmentally friendly, from the recycled construction material, to the organic food, to the LED lights. An ethanol-burning fireplace. A "raw" wood kitchen table. And of course, in the garage, a hybrid car. The house is called "smart" for a reason. Even the houseplants are clever. When a plant needs watering, a call is placed to your phone. That's right—your plant is calling to say it's thirsty. A black obelisk with blinking blue lights (that calls to mind HAL from "2001: A Space Odyssey") is the "brains and guts" of the "Smart Home"; it's an automated system that controls the heating, cooling and lighting of the entire house. A module of the house's network charts not only the amount of energy being used, but also the amount being produced. Guests are given a "Resource Guide" which, like a shopping catalogue, details each gadget and piece of furniture, and where everything can be purchased. We all might not be able to live in technologically advanced, self-sustainable houses, but we can live green by bringing aspects of the "Smart Home" into our own. (Laura Hawbaker) Through Jan 4. → THE GLASS EXPERIENCE. Vases edged in filigree, windows like Japanese shoji screens, vibrant sculpture pods—one wouldn't expect an exhibit at the Museum of Science and Industry to feature galleries flaunting Tiffany lamps, Frank Lloyd Wright windows and a Chihuly Macchia sculpture garden, but "The Glass Experience" does just that. The exhibit celebrates the collaboration between glassblowing and science, a relationship in which the artisans of Venice and Murano jumpstart technological leaps forward in LCD and fiber optics. The scientific specifics are only touched on in favor of a more all-inclusive look at the glass world. The exhibit opens with a dark "Industry & Invention" bunker, which offers a hodge-podge of glass facts: radioactive dishware, microscopes, windshields and witchglobes linked by one common thread—the material from which they're made. The "Invention" room offers tidbits and the various galleries present pretty things to look at, but what really makes "The Glass Experience" an event worth the trip comes near its end. Pathways gradually wind into larger spaces that culminate in two immense workshops peopled by real, live glass workers. Visitors can watch stained-glass artisans from the Botti Studio restore the Chicago Cultural Center's fragile, 120-year-old Tiffany Dome. Meanwhile, in-house master gaffers spinout glassblowing demonstrations during the Corning Hot Glass Show. The glassblowing show perfectly encapsulates the aim of "The Glass Experience"—a hypnotic merging of art and science. (Laura Hawbaker) Through Sep 1. Hours: Mon-Sat 9:30am-5:30pm, Sun 11am-5:30pm. Fees: \$11, \$10 Chicago residents with ID; \$9.50 seniors 65+, \$8.75 city residents; \$7 children 3-11, \$6.25 city residents; children 3 and under & members free. Thu free. Omnimax, U-505 sub tour & CSI exhibit prices not included. Parking \$12 non-members.