

NO MATTER THE DRY TRUTH,
EGGS BENEDICT STILL PLEASES



A Benediction

By Michael Nagrant

THEY SAY YOU ALWAYS REMEMBER YOUR FIRST. And were we talking about a kiss, I remember sitting on a recessed bench filled with orange life jackets on the second level of the Boblo Island ferry leaning towards my sixth grade “girlfriend” Monica. I remember the stench of rotting sea life from the Detroit River and the paprika scent of Better Made BBQ potato chips mingling with the floral waft of Giorgio perfume from her neck (though I suspect it was the Parfums de Coeur Designer Imposters knock-off—after all what 12-year-old can afford the real thing?) as we hesitantly merged our lips. Were we talking about sex, I remember that too, but kissing and telling is one thing, getting laid and doing so is quite another.

What I’m really talking about here is my first Eggs Benedict, the legendary English muffin raft conveying tasty castaways of salty pork and jiggly poached eggs awash in waves of silky hollandaise. And of that, I do not remember my first. Though, I suspect it was at an all-you-can-eat buffet, one of those restaurant-larder-clearing affairs featuring an orgy of tangled snow-crab legs, a miserable checked-pant-wearing short-order cook manning a butane-fired omelet station and mountains of chartreuse-rinded unripe cantaloupe. That means my first Benedict was likely a steam-table-parched muffin topped with Canadian bacon parchment and a sulfurous over-fried egg mottled with a gloppy, broken mock-hollandaise. Thankfully I subscribe to the idea that you try everything twice, because you never know if the first example was cooked right. Over the years, the dish has become such a favorite that like the crabcakes before, and the sweetbreads and foie gras that took their place, a Benedict is a dining certainty, a breakfast must-order.

Victory has a hundred fathers, and as such, the historical origins of the Benedict are murky. Depending on what or who you believe, either somewhere in the 1860s, a New York socialite, Mrs. LeGrand Benedict, no doubt the Paris Hilton of her day, was bored and could find nothing to her liking on the menu at Delmonico’s, so she summoned the chef Charles Ranhofer, who invented the dish to keep her at bay. Or, in 1894, Lemuel Benedict, a Wall Street banker, allegedly entered the Waldorf Hotel dining room and ordered up “some buttered toast, crisp bacon, two poached eggs and a hooker of hollandaise” to soothe his wicked hangover. Though Benedict may have been a ruthless nineteenth-century Gordon Gekko, I assume by “hooker” he meant “vessel” and he wasn’t going all Eliot Spitzer and ordering up a prostitute named Hollandaise. The Waldorf’s legendary chef, Oscar Tschirky, allegedly loved the request so much he put it on his menu, substituting Canadian bacon and a toasted English muffin in his final version. There are other stories of the origin, though none quite as colorful, and as origins go, spectacular mythology usually triumphs over the dry truth anyway. One thing that is true is that it says a lot about humanity that so many would battle for immortality in a breakfast dish.

Though, there are some Chicago chefs who probably deserve immortality, forty virgins or whatever their idea of heaven is for their ways with the Benedict. Frank Georgacopoulos of **Meli Café (301 South Halsted)** is one of those chefs. He and his cooks re-make their Hollandaise multiple times throughout the morning to ensure freshness. Likewise, the staff and owners blind-tasted and put multiple egg brands through their paces before settling on Eggland’s Best Organic eggs for their version. Meli offers eight different benedicts, which are all good, but the classic is my favorite.

Featuring two English muffins topped with roasted filet, crispy leeks and porcini hollandaise, the **Bongo Room’s (1152 South Wabash)** beef tenderloin Benedict is probably the only time I’ve ever indulged in that 1950s-diner ideal of steak and eggs. Though as tasty as this version is, I imagine Jack Kerouac would have kicked me upside the head for chowing on such precious gourmet breakfast fare. My favorite Benedict though is the slightly twisted “Eggs Flo” from **Flo (1434 West Chicago)**. This plate of French-toast-like brioche with thick, grilled smoked-turkey steak drizzled with leafy ribbons of fresh spinach, topped with two poached eggs, lemony hollandaise sauce and asiago cheese makes me wish I were a morning-radio personality just so I’d be guaranteed to be out of bed in time to snag a plate more regularly.

Just as some deserve paradise, there are some who belong with the heretics in the flaming tombs of the sixth circle of Dante’s conception of hell for their transgressions against the doctrine of great Eggs Benedict. One Sunday morning at West Loop’s **Wishbone (1001 West Washington)**, probably in an assembly-line-like effort to sate the slaving masses oozing out the door and onto Morgan Street, I was presented with a wet dog Benedict. The hollandaise was diluted and the muffins soggy with murky poaching water. On second thought, these cooks might only belong in the more forgiving third circle of hell with the gluttonous. For, as in mediocre pizza, bad sex or a sloppy first kiss, in even the worst Eggs Benedict I can always find some beauty.

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 hodgepodge 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.