

BUCKTOWN'S GOT A COPY CAT ON ITS HANDS



Breaking Down the Bristol

By Michael Nagrant

IMITATION MAY BE THE SINCEREST FORM OF FLATTERY, but ripping someone off is just a recipe for bad karma. With that in mind, The Bristol, Bucktown's new Midwestern-inspired trattoria, might be headed for some bad vibes.

I'm not saying this just because The Bristol has a chalkboard menu. Gil Langlois' Lincoln Square restaurant Chalkboard has, yep, chalkboard menus. Tufano's Vernon Park Tap and half the red sauce joints in Little Italy have them, and before desktop publishing, so did every little bistro. It's also not because The Bristol has a communal table; so did my grandmother's house and Avec.

Overlap is going to happen. But, this isn't like Chris Brown inserting a little Wacko Jacko Moonwalk into his otherwise groundbreaking Charlie Chaplin-inspired 2007 VMA hip-hop dance. There seems to be a bit more of a wholesale violation going on. Like Mado, less than a mile away, who also has the communal table and the chalkboard menu, the Bristol also butchers whole animals, features charcuterie and organ meats and is intensely focused on serving farmers-market produce. Even their menu has a similar brown tone. You're tempted to call The Bristol "Mado North" but that would be a disservice to Mado.

The buttery, crumbly shortbread at Mado might be the best you'll ever try, while the dense dry version (served with berries and a blah quenelle of crème fraîche) at the Bristol leaves you with a Cuervo-hangover-like cotton mouth.

The pork belly at Mado is succulent and perfumed with garlic and fennel. The pork belly at the Bristol features a chewy rind and dry meat girded by a greasy country-fried pork loin and a limp spaghetti squash cake. Like a Grateful Dead tour groupie, the dish is in need of some major acid.

Making comparisons to Mado isn't entirely fair. After all, The Bristol also "borrowed" Schwa's signature quail-egg ravioli dish. So, maybe they don't use the quail egg, and the brown butter sauce they use is as old as cuisine itself, but the presentation at the Bristol is eerily similar to Schwa's. The Bristol's version was pretty good, but like almost everything else on the menu, it could have used a touch more salt.

The Bristol did show restraint on imitation in the cocktail department. There was no one in 1920s period dress spanking herbs behind the bar ala Violet Hour. Still the Bristol offered a selection of drinks made from freshly squeezed juices and homemade syrups. But, a gleaming cocktail shaker, a tincture of bitters and some champagne coupes does not make you a top mixologist. The Bristol's Pisco Sour was horribly bitter due the cascade of cocktail bitters drizzled on the egg-white foam head. The Dark and Stormy made with homemade ginger beer and Bacardi Select was too limey and finished with a bitter, salty aftertaste. I asked partner Philip Walters why they were using Bacardi Select instead of traditional Goslings, or a more balanced rum, and he said their consulting bartender, who just happened to be a Bacardi rep, thought it was the best. Hmmm...

Not everything at the Bristol is an imitation. Their monkey bread with dill butter and sea salt served in mini cast-iron pots is new. The presentation is cute, but the bread was dry, there was no sea salt and the butter fat engulfed any discernable dill taste.

Despite the consistent food shortcomings, the Bristol might have the best service of any casual restaurant in the city. They fold napkins when you leave for the bathroom. They don't serve courses if all the parties aren't seated at the table, and they exchange plates and silverware with each course. The servers are knowledgeable and if they don't know something, they don't fake it.

This top service is even more incredible when you consider they'd only been open for a week and a half when I visited. That fact might also explain why even though most of my food was mediocre, I also had one of my favorite dishes of the year. Like Mado, the Bristol menu rotates frequently. True to this idea, they sold out of their sweetbreads the night I was there.

My server sensed my disappointment over the sweetbreads, and returned to the table a few minutes later and asked me if I was interested in some pork liver, heart and tongue that the chef had. I'd like to think I'd howled a manly Emeril-style "Bam" in response, but, I was so excited, I think I actually squealed out a Rachael-Ray-like "Yum-oh."

I was then rewarded with a lightly seared and thinly sliced rare pork liver topped with bitter greens, toasted hazelnuts, sautéed chanterelles and fennel vinaigrette. Pork liver is not foie gras. It can be chewy, gamy and nasty. But somehow the kitchen found a way to make it luxuriant, silky and rich, proving you can make a silk purse from a sow's liver. Despite the other food missteps, this dish signals that chef Chris Pandel has chops, and that The Bristol requires further investigation. Most importantly, the pork liver, not to mention the good marinated pork tongue and heart crostini on that same plate, represents a vision of solid head-to-tail cooking that we don't have much of in Chicago. If the folks at the Bristol follow that path more, there may be better times ahead.

The Bristol is located at 2152 North Damen, (773)862-5555

MUSEUMS

Chicago History Museum

1601 N. Clark, (312)642-4600. → CHIC CHICAGO: COUTURE TREASURES FROM THE CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM presents garments that date from 1861-2004 and represent the most prominent couturiers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. **See Tip of the Week.** Through Jul 26. Hours: Mon-Wed 9:30am-4:30pm, Thu 9:30-8pm, Fri-Sat 9:30-4:30pm, Sun noon-5pm. Fees: \$12; \$10 seniors 65+ and students 13-22 w/ID. Members and children under 12 free. Mon free.

Field Museum

1400 S. Lake Shore (at Roosevelt), (312)922-9410. → NATURE UNLEASHED. The Field Museum's "Nature Unleashed" opens with a tree cracked in half and stripped of bark. It is just one of many extraordinary visuals from the planet's most destructive natural phenomenon: earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes, hurricanes and tornados. The exhibit juxtaposes Earth's callous meteorological and seismic forces with the poignant human stories affected by its disasters. Visuals mimic the colossal power of nature while smaller artifacts, such as handwritten letters from Hurricane Katrina survivors, tug at heart-strings. The recorded sounds of seismic activity (alien-like pops and scrapes) lend the space an omnipresent sense of doom, as if at any moment the floor might rupture. The exhibit's most impressive offering is the invention of stormchaser Tim Samaras, a digital recording device which allows guests to stand in a 360-degree video-viewing area that places them in an approaching tornado's path. For several heart-stopping seconds, visitors are encircled by the eye of the storm. (Laura Hawbaker) Through Jan 4. 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. 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

TIP OF THE WEEK

CHIC CHICAGO: COUTURE TREASURES FROM THE CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM



"Chic Chicago," the newest exhibit at the Chicago History Museum, highlights more than fifty high-end couture gowns chosen from the museum's collection of more than 50,000 historical pieces. The exhibit is a unique juxtaposition of high-brow and low-brow, of silk, pearls and satin set against a backdrop of soot, metal and blood. In a city famous for its slaughterhouses and gangsters, Chicago's elite sought to rise above their hometown's stigma by flaunting fashion from the most expensive and cutting-edge couture boutiques in Europe. On display are dresses donned by notable Chicago women between 1861 and 2008: Mrs. Potter Palmer II was presented to the Queen of England in a chiffon Madeleine Vionnet gown in 1938; nearly sixty years later, Oprah Winfrey wore a Chanel evening gown she purchased on Michigan Avenue. While admiring the exquisite beauty of these fashion masterpieces, visitors are constantly reminded of the gritty, industrial city in which these gowns were worn. At a mirrored vanity against one wall, guests are welcome to apply the perfume of their choice: Chanel's infamous No. 5... or the timeless stink of the stockyard. (Laura Hawbaker)

"Chic Chicago" runs at the Chicago History Museum, 1601 North Clark, through July 26, 2009.

residents; children 3 and under & members free. Thu free. Omnimax, U-505 sub tour & CSI exhibit prices not included. Parking \$12 non-members.