



King of the Court

By Michael Nagrant

THIS WEEKEND, I WAS CHOWING DOWN IN A MALL FOOD COURT and Tommy Hilfiger was foremost on my mind. It was as if I were reliving my junior high glory days, those times when my mom stuffed me and my posse into the back of our teal Lincoln Town Car, aka the “land yacht” (a nod to its two-and-a-half-Chicago-parallel-parking-space-inhabiting body length) and dropped us off for a parentless afternoon to unleash mayhem on the mall.

We’d spend the afternoon parsing through the latest Z Cavaricci’s or flashing white suburban N.W.A.-inspired gangster poses while trying on fresh LA Kings or Raiders hats at the Foot Locker. Cavaricci gave way to Girbaud or Guess and eventually a phase worshipping the wares of the aforementioned urban prepster Hilfiger and his country-club cousin Ralph Lauren.

The low point of my laughable label obsession arrived in the form of a \$300 Polo sweater depicting a knitted teddy bear outfitted in a reflexive ursine-Lauren-like sweater. Stewart Smalley wouldn’t have been sensitive or stupid enough to wear the thing, and here I hankered for it as a symbol of the ultimate in high-school chic. Though I begged my folks for it mightily, they never caved. To quote Garth Brooks: “Thank God for unanswered prayers.”

Tuckered out from the fashion grab, those days we often headed for a food court outfitted with the usual suspects like oozy Cinnabons or fake-parmesan-doused breadsticks from the Pizza Hut Express. If we were particularly flush with allowance, the aspirational choice was cheddar-doused spuds served in a wax-coated paper cup and griddled beef hoagies from the Great Steak and Potato Company.

These days, while Great Steak still lives, my mall-food-court grazing isn’t quite as pedestrian, at least not when I’m at Macy’s on State Street. Over the last year or so, I’d been making it around the place one kiosk at a time. Rick Bayless’ killer huaraches at Frontera Fresco and Marcus Samuelsson’s juicy patties at Marc burger have both gotten positive nods from me. (And just so I know it’s not some anomaly, my wife ordered a burger this weekend at Marc burger and it was just as good as the last one I had. I stand by my assertion that this is one of the best burgers in the city. And Bayless was meeting with his kitchen staff while we were there too, proving he’s no absentee toque.)

This time around, I stopped in at Noodles by Takashi from the James Beard Award-winning Takashi Yagihashi, chairman of the eponymous haute hood hangout in Bucktown. I’d been tough on his gourmet operation for its lack of value, but his kiosk at Macy’s offers the ultimate in cheap eats, and maybe the ultimate in upscale chef-driven noodle joints.

Noodles by Takashi offers a spectrum of pop-Asian delights from spring rolls to pork buns to steamy soups. I settled for some Shoyu Ramen, a kettle-sized bowl of broth. I tucked in to the thing and worked my way through star anise-perfumed pork, toothsome broth-coated veggies and silky noodles, until only a dinky little puddle was left. As the micro-broth spots on my shirt could attest, the bowl was slurptastic.

This bowl also reinforced my disappointment in the value of the soups I had at Bill Kim’s Urban Belly in Avondale just a few weeks before. Takashi was charging \$9 (downtown no less), while Kim \$13 for what was essentially the same thing. Kim’s pork was slightly better and probably of higher quality, but I preferred Takashi’s noodle texture, and that his pork was seasoned with five spice, rather than overwhelming the whole broth as at Urban Belly.

While sucking down the bowl, I’d heard that Tommy Hilfiger was in town and about to light the Great Tree about a hundred feet away in the Walnut Room. Sated on good well-priced noodles, and intrigued at spotting a glimpse of the inspirational haberdasher of my youth, I headed on over. A group of festively garbed Dickens-novel-worthy carolers made their way through the Christmas canon, while I craned my head a couple of times, jostled for a prime viewing position and eventually decided it wasn’t worth the wait.

I wish you could take this as a metaphor that just as I’d reformed my bad food-court ways that my decision to spurn Tommy Boy meant that I was clearly over my label obsession. But, a few moments earlier I’d spotted a cool baby blue toddler-sized long-sleeve Polo rugby and bought it for my 19-month-old son. I’ll protest that it’s because I really love the new distinctive multi-colored super large Polo logos (Lauren’s re-tooling his brand by imitating the successful Louis Vuitton/Murakami collaboration). But, when I really think about, the hypersteroidal-sized logo is kind of a billboard that partly says, “My dad is a label-whore.” Clearly, I still have some bad habits to work out.

Noodles by Takashi, 111 North State, 7th Floor, (312)781-4483

MUSEUMS

Chicago History Museum

1601 N. Clark, (312)642-4600. →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 chignon 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) 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. →THE AZTEC WORLD. A mask carved from a human skull, the nose and tongue skewered by ceremonial daggers. This artifact, on display at the Field’s exclusive and expansive new exhibit, “The Aztec World,” exemplifies the most shocking aspects of the Mesoamerican tribe that, in just 200 years, shaped the foundations of modern-day Mexico. Caricaturized in the popular media as brutal and blood-thirsty, the Aztecs were in actuality a deeply complex, sophisticated society fascinated with dyads: male and female, light and darkness, life and death. This assemblage of nearly 300 artifacts has been collected in collaboration with ten Mexican museums. The exhibit explores the stark and shocking duality of the Aztecs: an empire that embraced life through technical and artistic achievements, and death through ritual human sacrifice. Museum guests can view wares from the Great Aztec Market, which dwarfed its European counterparts, as well as large stone statues excavated from the “House of Eagles” and the Templo Mayor in Mexico City. Another artifact—a large, rabbit-shaped drinking vessel for the alcoholic *pulque*—exemplifies a little-known aspect of Aztec culture: a charming and whimsical sense of humor. The Aztecs saw a rabbit’s silhouette in the face of the moon, thereby associating rabbits with a popular nighttime activity: drunkenness. (Laura Hawbaker) Through Apr 19. →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 heartstrings. 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. Ongoing. 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. FAST FORWARD...INVENTING THE FUTURE features new innovations and technology in agriculture, transportation, entertainment and more. Ongoing. 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.

Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum

2430 N. Cannon, (773)755-5100. →IN THE DARK. Just across the hall from the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum’s illustrious butterflies, darkness rules supreme. It is “In the Dark,” an exhibit dedicated to the slithering, flying, swimming creatures of the night. The space is broken up by environment: the darkness of the deep sea, the desert, caves, forests and the underground. Life-sized nature models are akin to three-dimensional “Where’s Waldo”’s; guests are encouraged to spot the stuffed flying squirrel, the sidewinder snake, the cave crayfish or the katydid. To make up for a lack of live fauna, “In the Dark” is jam-packed with kinesthetic games and puzzles. Guests learn about bat sonar by attempting to navigate a dark cave using only echoes, or balance atop a wobbling platform to learn about the statocysts of jellyfish. Match the Morse-code-like patterns of fireflies with their corresponding species. Catch a rat using infrared receptors via a rattlesnake hand puppet. Each interactive activity is linked by a common theme: a phenomenal ability to evolve, to develop heightened senses and compensate for a world without sight. (Laura Hawbaker) Through Jan 11. Hours: Mon-Fri 9am-4:30pm, Sat-Sun 10am-5pm. Fees: \$7; \$5 seniors 60+ and students 13-22 w/ID; \$4 children 3-12; members and children under 3 free. Thu free.