

GROCERY BISTRO BRINGS
HUMAN COMFORTS TO THE WEST LOOP

Like a Good Neighbor

By Michael Nagrant

FOR FIVE YEARS, I'VE BEEN A FOOD WRITER WITHOUT A COUNTRY, or at least a great neighborhood restaurant to call my own. You might protest that as a West Loop denizen, I've been luckier than most, what with the glittering jewel of restaurant row on Randolph and carnivorous visions of glistening lamb spit-roasting in my Greek-joint-littered backyard. But expensive, even if inspired, lacquered glitterati-filled palaces and ethnic-focused conveyor-belt kitchens do not a neighborhood restaurant make. The bustle of such places may boil the blood, but they do not stir one's soul.

A real neighborhood place is the Hemingwayesque ideal, the café of his short story "A Clean, Well Lighted Place," where an old man can drink his liquor or take his supper in the company of humanity, staving off the crippling loneliness of old age.

It is a place where the razor chafe of Lake Michigan's wintry squalls are kept at bay either by the flicker of a fireplace, or the flames stoked in the heart by a generous proprietor. Such an owner infuses his house, maison, chez or whatever he wishes to call it, not with preachiness, but only with the whims of his outsized and utterly individual personality.

The meal at a real neighborhood spot is neither fancy, nor pedestrian. Freshly shaved black truffles are maybe too much, and a hot dog is not enough.

At a great neighborhood place the scent of a woman mingles with the bouquet from a lovely flower arrangement. It's a place where lovers can linger over the soft touch of linens, but never have to lock horns over a lavish bill. While no requirement, a plush banquette that serves as a sort of upright hammock for a wearied body, and a touch, or better yet, a full-scale womb of dark wainscoting to dull any bright reflection that might jar tired eyes, are both nice measures of interior design.

And by these ideals, I have loved West Town Tavern, Erwin's, Hopleaf, Café Le Coq, Crofton's on Well's, Cyrano's Bistrot, Jack's on Halsted, Yoshi's Café and Mado, among others. But, these places have all required a drive, and maybe the greatest requirement of all for a neighborhood restaurant is the ability to amble over on foot for a regular nosh or a tippie.

And so when the Grocery Bistro opened up a mere five blocks away from my house a few weeks ago, I was hopeful that my day had come. On the genial proprietor side of things, Grocery Bistro had it covered. Head toque Andre Christopher, formerly of Japonais and Pops for Champagne, is as mercurial and idiosyncratic as they come. Though he's now a vegetarian (a result of joining his mother, who recently was diagnosed with a condition preventing her from eating meat, in solidarity), he once favored and still hankers for a Mr. Beef Italian beef topped with chili, cheddar and French fries. Though his heroes are Gordon Ramsay and Charlie Trotter (their autographs line the bar at Grocery Bistro), he's not afraid to source the green beans for his meals from the Dominick's grocery across the street in a pinch. And yet, he strives for all the meats he serves to be natural and/or grass fed.

He serves dinner for dessert and dessert for dinner. A molten lobe of seared foie gras dusted with a Heath candy bar rubble swims in Venezuelan chocolate and strawberry compote, while his tiramisu is larded with bacon. This tiramisu is not, as tradition seems to dictate, a uniform square of liquor-soaked glop, but a smart deconstruction where caramelized bananas and lady fingers, only lightly macerated in Amaretto, lend a delightful crunchy textural counterpoint to soft peaks of lustrous coffee cream.

While his ingredients are not particularly rare, his chili-and-salt-crusteds lambs chops, as they should be, are. The fire and seasoning on the lamb is so pleasing, that one does not mind so much that the creamy spinach and curry-infused couscous could use a touch more salt.

Much like Christopher, the tables at Grocery Bistro represent a stark duality. The Bradyesque porcelain is sourced from the Salvation Army, but the Fortessa flatware is stylish, long and slender like a Modigliani muse. They both rest on crisp white butcher-paper-free linens back-dropped by a long plush banquette.

Those plates are delivered and cleared by a server's server named Jim, a man who may not be Swiss, but his timing certainly is. Jim's voice is a golden masterpiece, its dulcet tones honey to your ears, and a recitation of the daily specials sounds like the pillow talk of a late-night radio DJ. His foodrunner brings pretzels to head off your fussy toddler, but only after inquiring about potential peanut allergies.

While I may sound wistful and nostalgic, the truth is I'm much closer in age to the young waiter in Hemingway's tale, the hurried man who wishes to finish his job to get home to his family, the man who sees the lingering lonely old customer at his lighted café as a nuisance. But, I am not so young that I do not recognize myself in that old man and, for that, and to have found a place like Grocery Bistro, I am very thankful.

Grocery Bistro, 804 West Washington, (312)850-9291

TIP OF THE WEEK
S.L. WISENBERG



Adapting her blog to full-fledged book, local author S.L. Wisenberg transforms her illness memoir into a fiercely engaging and often very, very funny account of her battle with breast cancer. The title, "The Adventures of Cancer Bitch," should be the first clue that Wisenberg wasn't prepared to linger in an overly sentimental region and play to readers' fears and Lifetime-movie expectations. She claimed "Bitch," she writes, because "Babe was too young and Vixen was already taken." Presented in a diary format, the piece is, at its core, a 160-page staring match Wisenberg has with herself. Doctors, diagnosis, medication, chemo, surgery—sure, it's in there. The most devastating offerings aren't found in the cold facts that are beaten into our bodies by health magazines and prescription-pill commercials, but rather under blog entries with titles like "How Not To Tell Your Class About Your Breast Cancer." (Wisenberg, Jewish, deftly adapts the wit of Woody Allen as well.) But, like the best of the savage memoirs, it's doused in hope, and as readers, we share a most important reward in the end: life. (Tom Lynch)

S.L. Wisenberg discusses "Adventures of Cancer Bitch" May 6 at 57th Street Books, 1301 East 57th, (773)684-1300, at 6pm. Free.

READINGS

—THU/30

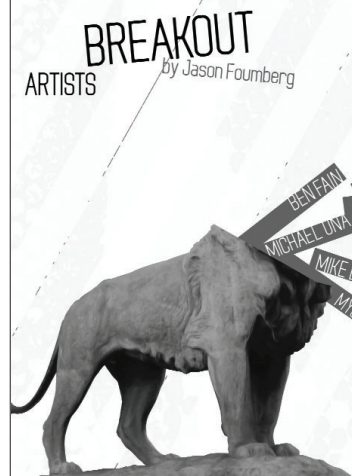
Catherine O'Connell

The author discusses "Well Read and Dead." See 411. The Book Cellar, 4736 N. Lincoln, (773)293-2665. 7pm. Free.

—WED/6

S.L. Wisenberg Patrick Somerville

See Tip of the Week. 57th Street Books, 1301 E. 57th, (773)684-1300. 6pm. Free.



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