

Mint Ambition

The communal table is merry in theory, but how often do you *really* end up swapping stories with strangers? Forge a true culinary comradeship with Mint Experience, a new venture from 25-year-old Chicago entrepreneur Nicole Paul. The party-planning pro chooses restaurants in River North—she will be expanding to other neighborhoods soon—and invites you to come solo (Single Mint) or in twos (Double Mint) to try a new restaurant with new tablemates. Single Mint brunches and dinners are grouped by age (25-35 and 35-55, roughly), and both Single and Double Mints cap at 20 guests to create an intimate, but invitingly casual, event. This month, Mint hosts meals at Devon Seafood Grill and new spot Italiasia, where we hope we can tear ourselves away from the chicken Milanese long enough to make some new pals. *Reservations required. 312.502.4581, mintexperience.com. —L.S.*

Ghirardelli lava cake at Devon Seafood Grill, where new dinner club Mint Experience meets in July.



NOSH NEWS



The Lush's new Protein Bar offers smoothies blended with vanilla and chocolate protein.

SMOOTHIE OPERATOR Get reacquainted with your bikini thanks to new spot Protein Bar. Owner Matt Matros lost 60 pounds on a high-protein diet, and he's spreading the word with blended drinks, quinoa bowls, wraps and more. *235 S. Franklin St., proteinbarchicago.com.*

DOUGH BOY! Forget delivery. On Friday nights, one sixtyblue fires up its wood-burning oven for \$5 thin-crust pizzas in the Blue Bar. The \$4 Prosecco cocktails go down as easy as, well, the zucchini blossom- and blue cheese-topped pies. *1400 W. Randolph St., onesixtyblue.com.*

PARK ACE Visit Lockwood at the Palmer House Hilton for its Picnic in the Park package—flush with goodies like smoked salmon sandwiches and shrimp cocktails, and packed with silverware, plates and napkins, too. *17 E. Monroe St., lockwoodrestaurant.com.*

PUTTING DOWN ROOTS The team behind Humboldt Park's cozy Rootstock Wine & Beer Bar includes alums from Webster's Wine Bar, Goose Island and Pops for Champagne. *954 N. California Ave., rootstockbar.com.*

CALLING HIS BLUFF Okay, farm-fresh *does* feel more authentic when we're 30 miles outside of city skyscrapers. At Inovasi in Lake Bluff, feast on suckling pig, crème fraîche and more from former Bank Lane Bistro chef John des Rosiers. *28 E. Center Ave., Lake Bluff, inovasi.us. —L.S.*



Q&A

Chef Efrain Cuevas at one of his Clandestino dinners at Lush wine shop.

The Clandestine Chef

As one of the featured subjects in Mark Caro's new book, *The Foie Gras Wars*, Chicago chef Efrain Cuevas and his series of underground dinner parties are emerging into an uncharted spotlight. This month, Cuevas, whose Clandestino dinners get diners down and dirty in the kitchen, hosts a meal inspired by serving vessels made by local ceramics artist Melissa Monroe (who will also make a piece during the event), as well as a "Total Aphrodisiac" dinner to benefit Slow Food Chicago.

A blogger once wrote that she might be in love with you and called you "yum"... It was cool that someone thinks that what we're doing to raise awareness about where meat comes from is interesting.

By raise awareness you're talking about holding a head-to-tail goat dinner with meat from a goat you killed? Yeah, we couldn't do it because of city inspectors.

Why is it important to kill an animal yourself? If you're going to eat meat, you should

understand where it comes from and be willing to take responsibility for that. I respect every piece of meat I cook, and I only eat responsibly raised meat.

How does it feel to be in a book? When the foie gras ban passed, I thought it would be cool to do this 'Screw you [Alderman] Joe Moore' dinner. Mark called me and asked if he could cover it. I really believe as a chef you need to try everything, and foie lends a richness to food you can't get from anything else. *clandestinodining.org. —Michael Nagrant ■*