



Gilt Bar

RATING: ★★★

230 W. Kinzie St.,
312.464.9544

What the stars mean:

★ = fair, some noteworthy qualities;

★★ = good, above average;

★★★ = very good, well above norm;

★★★★ = excellent, among the area's best;

★★★★★ = world-class, extraordinary in every detail.

Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service.

WHAT TO WEAR: *Vintage T-shirts and jeans to fit in with the gastro-clubby crowd.*

WHAT TO ORDER: *Charcoal-grilled escarole, pork meatballs with white grits, house-made ice cream trio.*

WHEN TO GO: *Weekdays after the Merchandise Mart workday winds down if you want to experience the soul of the place.*

WHAT TO KNOW: *The "Hoffman" of PBR, offered for \$2, is a generous goblet of Milwaukee's famous lager.*

WHO GOES: *Young River Northers, Merchandise Mart interior designers and Viagra Triangle-frequenting old guys with young dates.*

WHAT IT COSTS: *Appetizers \$6-\$16, entrées \$9-\$21, desserts \$3-\$8.*

GOOD AS GOLD *Clockwise from top left: Oven-roasted, hand-cut pork meatballs with Anson Mills hand-ground polenta, brown butter and thyme; Gilt's amply stocked bar; the Kinzie Street awning. Below: The Queen's Park Swizzle.*



Gilt-y as Charged

Keller-trained chef Brendan Sodikoff breaks free from high-fuss dining

| By Michael Nagrant | Photography by Dave Slivinski |

A woman in a white, strapless party dress paces between the burnished leather banquettes and rustic wooden tables at Gilt Bar. She bites her bottom lip, tugging at the hem of her dress and fingering the black trim up top as she walks. Whatever she's looking for, she hasn't found it. Finally, she pauses in the center of the room, resolute, beneath the tendrils of a silver chandelier that looks like a jellyfish poised to snare its prey. And then she's gone.

I can't help but notice her. For Gilt Bar, located in the looming art deco shadow of the Merchandise Mart, is the current ground zero for hip designati—vintage T-shirt and jeans central. This is the kind of place that makes you think that dressing up for dinner is for moms and starch-shirted bankers.

Twenty feet away, through the wide-screen picture window into Gilt's kitchen, is chef/owner Brendan Sodikoff, working the pass in a baby blue bandanna. And like the woman in white, he doesn't seem to belong. He is an acolyte of culinary demigods Alain Ducasse and Thomas Keller, a five-star cook who's decided to chuck the dining temple ideal in favor of opening up

a casual American joint, where almost every dish costs less than \$20. But Gilt Bar is *his* joint. It's the way he wants to operate: fine food without the fuss.

The guy sometimes comes off as cocky (ask him who designed Gilt's new, drinks-only basement lounge and he'll have no problem crediting himself before the architects), but his food backs him up. If Sodikoff wants to serve frites, like every other gastropub in the Chicago universe, he can. This is because he has kicked the common Idaho russet starch bomb to the curb. Instead, I receive a glistening cocktail shaker filled with a paper cone of smooth-skinned, crispy, but curiously light Kennebec potato fries.

If Sodikoff wants to, he can spin The Smiths and Lou Reed to compete with the roar of the liquor-fueled, late-20s crowd. And he does. I'm dining with a paper exec (cue the Michael Scott jokes) and a radio producer, but I can't hear much of what they're saying.

That's okay, since I can't really talk anyway. I'm sucking down a refreshing Queen's Park Swizzle—ginger-perked, five-year-old rum accented by ruddy,



Paul McGee, of hipster cocktail mecca The Whistler, consulted on Gilt's drink menu, and his expertise is working out. This is the best cocktail I've had at a restaurant (read: not a mixology geek temple) in a while.



From top: Bar seats flank the picture window to Gilt's kitchen; charcoal-grilled bread with Gioia burrata, olive oil, black pepper, English pea purée and mint.

anise-flavored Peychaud's bitters and bright mint leaves muddled with lime and simple syrup. The drink, with its different colored liquors layered over crushed ice, mimics the Italian flag. Paul McGee, of hipster cocktail mecca The Whistler, consulted on Gilt's drink menu, and his expertise is working out. This is the best cocktail I've had at a restaurant (read: not a mixology geek temple) in a while.

I'm as captivated by the décor—dim candles, spare Edison bulb light fixtures that glow like fireflies, gilded, arched mirrors over a marble bartop—as I am by the drinks. But when the waiter comes with our next dish, I'm reminded that this is Sodikoff's show. Charcoal-grilled bread is dappled in olive oil and topped with a dollop of verdant sweet pea purée and a softball-sized hunk of burrata. The burrata is so juicy that breaching it is like taking a bite out of a water balloon. The creamy richness teems in my mouth.

The menu, which lacks traditional divisions of appetizers and entrées, is ordered instead by food type (salads, vegetables, pasta, meat and seafood, and “on

toast”) and is structured for sharing. Though we order everything at once, the delivery of plates is casual, with veggies arriving after meat plates and bowls of pasta before salads.

The only problem with doing things casually, as Sodikoff is, is that people who work for you might mistake the relaxed vibe as permission to underperform. Our waitress fails to change our dirty plates and silverware out after a few rounds of courses, something one of her fellow servers does for us much later in our meal. When we take a break from the frites to eat the burrata, our server, hoping to entice us to eat more fries, rips the paper cone from the shaker. I can only imagine that she'd hoped to mimic a magician, removing the tablecloth from a fully set table without disturbing a glass. But it's a sloppy move and she spills a good portion of our fries.

It's hard to complain, though, when I'm sated by juicy hand-cut pork meatballs with butter-soaked white grits.

As dinner continues, the kitchen's mistakes are few and forgivable. Seared orange nairagi (a light tuna-like fish) perched on a nest of shaved vegetables is well-cooked, but the carrots and cabbage underneath are heavy with vinegar. The sweet acid of the accompanying grapefruit should cut through, but it's overwhelmed by the other flavors, and the mint listed on the menu is MIA.

We almost miss out on our next course, as a waifish waitress (not our original), clad in a Lennon/Ono *Wedding Album* T-shirt, sweeps our table clean of silverware and plates but neglects to bring new ones. Our food runner corrects the miscue after dropping off sweet balsamic fig-glazed escarole with dehydrated wheat berries that have the same crunch as Corn Nuts. The satisfying crack paired with the sweet glaze might convince me to look into that whole vegetarianism thing.

Or not. A Texas ribeye-sized hunk of grilled swordfish, rare and light and accompanied by a yin yang of sweet currants and sour kumquats, is a pretty good argument for a carnivorous diet. Teamed with peppery arugula and buttery pine nuts, each flavor pops off at its own time and in concert with the others, building like a fireworks grand finale.

By the time we get to our real finale, the waitress is pimping the house-made caramel corn and warm brownie sundae. (The dessert menu has no prices. Unfortunately, this does not mean that they're free. Prices have been added since my visit, the restaurant says.) The caramel corn is better than Cracker Jack, but doesn't replace Garrett's hot, buttery version. The brownie is dry, but the house-made vanilla ice cream is silky and light.

As I scoop some up, I think if there's any reason the woman in the white dress left, maybe it was because she was a serious foodie who couldn't stand the pulsing scene. If so, she missed out. Despite the iffy dessert, Sodikoff's cooking is more complex and tasty than most other comers in the local gastropub genre. But be warned: Gilt is as much gastro-club as it is pub—a true treasure to those looking for killer eats *and* a killer night. ■