



Browntrout

RATING: ★★★

4111 N. Lincoln Ave.,
773.472.4111

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: Hipsters should rock a vintage fisherman's vest. Everyone else will be fine in jeans or business casual.

WHAT TO ORDER: Chervil crêpes, Country Cottage Farm chicken thigh, pan-seared Idaho golden trout, strawberry shortcake.

WHEN TO GO: Weekdays when the crowd is lighter and the kitchen less taxed.

WHAT TO KNOW: If you love wine, ask to be served by Chase.

WHO GOES: Lincoln Square residents and foodies looking for tasty value.

WHAT IT COSTS: Appetizers \$8-\$16; entrées \$11-\$25; desserts \$7.

A Fine Catch

Hook, line and sinker—Lincoln Square's new Browntrout reels us in with its simple flavors and inspiring wines | *By Michael Nagrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier* |

When you're the parent of a two-year-old who occasionally screams like Janet Leigh in *Psycho*, the last thing you're looking for is drama. Tonight, in need of serious respite, my wife and I had called up the babysitter so we could take refuge in a restorative meal at a new neighborhood restaurant making a big name for its unpretentious, sustainable fare. Little did we know that Browntrout, and its Lincoln Square surroundings, would turn into a culinary opera.

Tucked at a front table near an open window on an Indian summer night, wrapped in the comfort of warm, dark woods and terrazzo-style tile, and basking in the reflective glow of glass sconces against a merlot red wall, we immediately peg a cast of characters amidst the standard professional types and healthy dollop of

first-daters in this small, 80-seat dining room. There's the man still wearing his bike helmet. (Though, who can blame him? One bite of Browntrout's lime mascarpone-topped strawberry shortcake, countered by the satisfying crunch of smoky almond brittle, will have you guilted onto the elliptical; he's just ahead of the curve.) There are the reveling drunkards who cheerily march by our window. And then there's our server, Chase.

Chase sports huge granny glasses and a bald head, and looks like a cross between Sally Jessy Raphael and Alan Arkin. He has a nervous, clumsy banter, à la Woody Allen, and endearingly brings us menus again after he's taken our order. However, once he settles in, and reads that my wife and I are the type of table a CONTINUED...

BROWNIE POINTS Top, clockwise from top left: Browntrout's chalkboard of lunch options; a table begonia; Country Cottage Farm chicken breast with ham-hock scented cranberry beans, squash purée, swiss chard and a grape jus. Below: Pan-seared whitefish with mousseline, bamboo rice cake, shishito peppers, chervil and corn consommé.



...CONTINUED waiter can joke with, his idiosyncrasies, which include dropping quotes from the Eddie Murphy version of *The Nutty Professor* and calling out that he's jealous of "the hair on that one" in reference to a passing sheep dog on the street, enliven the evening.

Chase is also a walking *Wine Spectator*, able to quote the flavor profile of every wine on the new list (Browntrout was previously BYO). He steers us to an inspired glass of Brooks Amycas, a white blend that tastes like a peach orchard bordered by a river of honey. I've rarely had a high-end sommelier as smart and excited about wine as Chase, and certainly none who has ever referred to a high-alcohol red (a nice berry-infused Agoston Grenache/Syrah) as a "full-blown alkie." With lots of choices at \$6 to \$9 a glass, we're able to construct a nice wine tasting without busting the budget.

Like the wine list, the menu from chef Sean Sanders—former sous at Bin 36—is geared for sampling. There are plenty of regular entrées, but the small plates, along with the chalkboard menu of nightly specials, are most enticing. One bite of moist, rich chicken thigh swimming in a pool of creamy polenta, and I'm smitten. However, just before I dub the man "Colonel" Sanders for his aplomb with poultry, we are served a seared piece of duck foie gras that's cold in the middle, with subtle Concord grape syrup overshadowed by assertive hazelnut-flavored fritters.

Chase gives us constant updates on the time between forthcoming plates since the kitchen is running behind. Though, except for the foie, and slightly dry pork belly in ravioli that otherwise rests on a beautiful garlic-perfumed tomato sauce, the flavors at Browntrout are precise and ultimately redemptive, no matter what the pace of the meal. Sanders toasts nuts to great impact on almost every plate, my favorite show of this being the sweet drizzle of almond crême that runs through a tender chervil crêpe. The crêpe itself bursts with the earthiness of roasted chanterelle mushrooms and Illinois sweet corn. A Charlie Trotteresque bite in its clean-flavored refinement, it's one of the best things I've eaten all year.

During the break between entrées and dessert, our opera reaches its climax: a pitched reality TV-worthy battle has started outside. A couple screams at each other in the front seat of a white car parked on a side street, causing the woman to hurl her arm back



like Jay Cutler and send a glinting ring arcing through the air. This may not be a typical scene at Browntrout, but, between this and glimpses of a film noir and ESPN's *Friday Night Fights* on a TV in a neighboring third-floor condo, I'm enjoying the spontaneity of our Lincoln Avenue view.

The row continues through a dessert of that sumptuous strawberry shortcake, plus a flaky strudel filled with tender ripe peaches and drizzled with spicy ginger syrup—all made by Sanders. The sweets temper the tension of the couple, who are searching for the ring and taking the occasional break to scream at one another. With our bellies full and happy, we're ready to get home, even with a potentially truculent toddler in wait. Hopefully the babysitter has gotten him to sleep. ■



From top: Browntrout's communal table; peach strudel with Ellis Farms peaches, ginger syrup and ricotta flan.

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