



LM, Le Restaurant

RATING: ★★

4539 N. Lincoln Ave.,
773.942.7585

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: *Jeans and anything that's not a sweatshirt.*

WHAT TO ORDER: *Poached farm egg, brown butter crêpes, peanut butter cream tarte.*

WHEN TO GO: *Wednesdays and Thursdays for the \$22 bistro menu, which includes an appetizer and an entrée.*

WHAT TO KNOW: *There is free corkage on Tuesdays.*

WHO GOES: *Lincoln Square residents, especially lovey-dovey twosomes.*

WHAT IT COSTS: *Appetizers \$6-\$18; entrées \$19-\$26; desserts \$7-\$11.*

LE MAGIC *Clockwise from top left: LM's cozy dining room looks out onto Lincoln Avenue; peanut butter cream tarte with honey mousse; glassware. Below: Brown butter crêpes with caramelized shallots, Gruyère and swiss chard.*



Hip To Be Square

In Lincoln Square, the chic French-focused LM fills a void in fine neighborhood dining

| By Michael Nagrant | Photography by Dave Slivinski |

If *Hot Tub Time Machine*, Doc Brown and Marty McFly are to be believed (and who would dispute such credible sources), we may someday be able to go back in time. When smart people figure that whole thing out, I know where I'll be going: My last stop, after the Savoy in London, La Pyramide in Vienne, France, and an early Chez Panisse, would be Blackbird in the West Loop circa 1998. If anyone taught me that you can cook and talk about high-end food without wearing a monocle or choking on 10-cent words, and do it all while rocking a Ramones T-shirt, it was Paul Kahan. For that I am grateful, and I'd like to have been there when it all started.

But it turns out I don't have to find a souped-up DeLorean to get my old-school dining fix. I can just hit up LM, Le Restaurant in Lincoln Square for a jolt of Blackbird nostalgia; it offers the same highbrow fare in a low-key setting, from a chef who did time as sous at the 'Bird. However, just as time travel can take its own course—sometimes, Biff takes Lorraine to the Enchantment Under the Sea dance—LM is

not a carbon copy of vintage Blackbird. On a recent Thursday night, I found the *je ne sais quoi* of this neighborhood-centric spot.

For one, the rock music playing over the house speakers at LM is French, and filled with gallic-tinged R.E.M. and Counting Crows facsimiles. The room is not a spare modern white box like Blackbird, but features warm shades of brown, sharp leather high-backed chairs and black-and-white photos of the owners' children (Luc and Mary, for whom LM is named).

I have never seen so many couples sharing the same side of the table at Blackbird, nor at any place where people aren't also sucking down chocolate shakes through side-by-side straws. While co-owner Stephan Outrequin-Quaisser wants the place to be the quintessential neighborhood restaurant, he's most clearly succeeding in making it Lincoln Square's top canoodling cabana.

Outrequin-Quaisser is not as intense as Blackbird's Donnie Madia, but he makes a mean French 75 cocktail, where juniper (from Bombay Sapphire



Service at LM surpasses the neighborhood standard. It is more reflective of owner Outrequin-Quaisser's days at the Drake, with silverware swapped out at each course and napkins folded when my wife goes to the bathroom.



From top: Sautéed veal sweetbreads with caramelized onion ravioli and sauce *zingara*; husband-and-wife team Stephan and Nicole Outrequin-Quaisser.

gin), lemon juice and dry bubbly mingle in exquisite harmony. He also doubles as a sommelier, guiding us through excellent pours like a minerally 2007 Maison Kuentz-Bas Alsace Blanc. It's got a nice citrus nose, but I have to wait a while to experience it, as the wine is served icy cold. No matter, for the 2006 Martellotto Cabernet Sauvignon, from Paso Robles, that my wife orders is at perfect temp, thus allowing me an immediate slurp of blackberry with an earthy finish.

Service at LM surpasses the neighborhood restaurant standard, and sometimes even the very high Blackbird one. It is more reflective of Outrequin-Quaisser's days working at the Drake, with silverware swapped out at each course and napkins folded when my wife goes to the bathroom.

It's then, sitting solo, that I really start to notice the similarities to Blackbird. The slick, bright orange banquettes and napkins at LM conjure the color scheme of the old menu. Table accoutrement like the swannecked stemware, mod-cut lean crystal wine decanters and heavy checkered pattern silverware would definitely

fly at Blackbird. Thanks to a wide picture window, I can watch the chefs sweat it out at LM, just like we can over at 619 West Randolph. Unfortunately, we also get to see the exposed electric fixtures and conduit in the kitchen, which is a little jarring to eye in the otherwise soothing dining room.

But as I mentioned, it's the food that's been landing on our cozy two-top here that is unmistakably Blackbird 1997-2005: seasonal, local, pristinely clean and soul satisfying. Chef Bradford Phillips' poached farm egg, perched on a slice of buttery brioche that's coddled in a nest of rich, velvety maitake mushroom ragout has us beckoning for more of the house bread to sop up the remaining mushroom-infused broth underneath.

Phillips' veal sweetbreads, which feature a golden crust and custardy center, are twice as good as the ones I had at the ultra-gourmet Ria in the Elysian Hotel, and cost a third less. The accompanying ravioli, brimming with sweet caramelized onion, is the gossamer dumpling of my dreams.

The soup de poisson that arrives next rides the edge of fishiness. It also needs more acid, and a fresh finishing touch of Cognac, Pernod or sherry to perk up the monotone tomato and seafood notes.

Though I am a stalwart carnivore, the second best thing we eat all night is a meat-free plate of brown butter crêpes blanketed in sweet, bubbly Gruyère and draped over a mound of wilted and well-seasoned mineral-rich swiss chard.

A woman across the room asks Outrequin-Quaisser if the "beef cheeks" are what they sound like. He confirms they are indeed from the cow's face, and she balks. Normally I'd pity her squeamishness—cheeks being one of the tenderest cuts around—but it serves her well, for though LM's are cooked on point, they need salt, and the rock hard spring peas underneath need a few more minutes of blanching.

All is redeemed with dessert, a delicate milk chocolate glazed peanut butter cream tarte from Lincoln Park bakery Vanille Pâtisserie, garnished with an airy top hat of honey mousse. A pastry chef is an extravagance at a tiny neighborhood spot like LM, and Outrequin-Quaisser's decision to outsource (minus the tarte tatin for two, a caramelized apple and puff pastry concoction that's made in house) from the best patisserie in Chicago is wise.

Though I dig the Kahan nostalgia here, today's Blackbird, under chef Mike Sheerin, is doing more daring things than ever before. Phillips could follow suit. His mistakes with the beef cheek and the soup suggest oversight born of comfort or boredom. If he were to throw in a little of the salt and spice flair from his old Saltaus restaurant days, LM might just become a destination. For now, Phillips' style, though safe, is high enough to make LM a standout neighborhood restaurant in a neighborhood that definitely needs it. ■