



Prairie Fire

RATING: ★★★

215 N. Clinton St.,
312.382.8300

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: *Polo shirts and Dockers for men; preppy shirt dresses for women.*

WHAT TO ORDER: *Corn fritters, lamb sausage, seasonal pie.*

WHEN TO GO: *7PM mid-week if you want to experience the buzz of a boisterous room. (Make reservations if your party is larger than four.)*

WHAT TO KNOW: *Prairie Fire's brunch is one of the best in town.*

WHO GOES: *Wealthy North Shore residents and Chicago's empty-nesting crowd.*

WHAT IT COSTS: *Appetizers \$5.50-\$12; entrées \$15-\$27; desserts \$7.50.*

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE...

Clockwise from top left: Prairie Fire's dining room; corn fritters; the entrance on Clinton Street; the signature bunless burger with a blue cheese crust, grilled tomato and potato wedges.



Fire Foxes

From its amped-up greatest hits to its silver-haired crowd, Prairie Fire proves that classic can still be cookin' | *By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Dave Slivinski* |

I think there's a secret grandmother cabal that meets every week at Prairie Fire, the seasonal contemporary American restaurant in the West Loop. How else to explain that there are probably more *bubbes* per square inch chowing down in the dark wood-trimmed dining room than on the shuffleboard court at a Palm Springs retirement community?

Interestingly, this isn't your typical early bird special-seeking, polyester-clad set. I'm talking silver foxes with sharp Anna Wintour bobs and big white bug-eye sunglasses sitting next to well-tanned Sean Connery-esque men in sharp slacks, shiny blazers and Breitling watches.

Prairie Fire is a sceneless scene of empty nesters and North Shore money gathering with their families, celebrating birthdays, knocking back a few Martinis and digging into big hunks of brisket and pink planks of seared Tallgrass beef.

As they dig in, I do, too, sinking back into one of the many cozy half-moon banquettes to eat up the Wednesday night vibe. Prairie Fire inherited much of

its deep woodwork and beige color scheme from the designers of the last restaurant that called the space home, Powerhouse. And on that count, it still looks a little like a steakhouse as imagined by Frank Lloyd Wright—and the Ramada Inn interior design team. It's clean and classic, but there's also a commuter-hotel lobby feel. The drop ceiling grid and security lighting in the center of the room offer a utilitarian counterpoint to the vintage metal and multi-pane glass windows that tower over the low-slung dining room.

Thankfully, former Ritz-Carlton chefs Sarah Stegner and George Bumbaris, who also run Prairie Grass Café in Northbrook, have put their own stamp on the place. They removed Powerhouse's generic black-and-white prints in favor of abstract photos featuring blazing tendrils of flame and scenes from an actual prairie fire. They've also installed a couple of flat-screen televisions displaying a rotating slideshow of farm and botany porn, including digital photos of verdant pastures intermixed with extreme close-ups of vivid flora and fauna. At first it's fun CONTINUED...



Silver foxes with sharp Anna Wintour bobs and bug-eye sunglasses are sitting next to well-tanned Sean Connery-esque men with sharp slacks, shiny blazers and Breitling watches.



From top: Parmesan-crusted tilapia with string beans; the Summer Sazerac with Woodford Reserve bourbon, North Shore Distillery absinthe and orange bitters.

...CONTINUED to watch, but after a while it feels like you're watching a loop of The Weather Channel's local forecast segment.

While my friend and I stare at the screen, our waiter arrives. Clad in a black cotton guayabera-style shirt (like all the waiters), he transports me to a Cuban dance hall or a poolside cabana in Vegas. To keep that going, I order a Dark and Stormy cocktail, and am awarded with an authentic mix of spicy-sweet Gosling's Black Seal rum and ginger beer. It's a perfect rendition of the classic. The cocktail list is a balanced mix of staples like this, along with inventive new drinks, including the Nordic Nectar, made with pineapple-infused vodka. Then there's the wine list, which boasts a nice by-the-glass selection. On another visit, I sip the Domaine Champalou Chenin Blanc Vouvray 2008, crisp and dry with grapefruit and citrus.

After bringing drinks, our guy moves over to the faux-Wintour table and starts whooping it up with the foxes while I dig in to the fritters of my dreams—deep-fried, airy doughnuts studded with local corn

and slathered with sweet, fiery honey-jalapeño butter. These are so good that if Stegner and Bumbaris opened a stand downtown serving them, it would rival New Orleans' Café Du Monde in the pantheon of fried dough palaces.

Stegner is a co-chair of the Green City Market board, and she puts her money where her mouth is. Local produce (like that corn) and meat is abundant, and particularly well showcased in sweet, pink candy-striped roasted beets larded with tangy goat cheese and toasted hazelnuts, and in garlicky oregano-spiced hunks of glistening house-made lamb sausage served on a bed of fanned grilled onions, one of the finest encased meats in Chicago not served at Hot Doug's. Pretty much every chef these days uses local product, but few know how to showcase it like Stegner.

Pies, offered in one flavor that rotates seasonally, (along with five other desserts) are all family recipes from Stegner's mom, Elizabeth, who used to cook them herself at Prairie Grass Café. Her glistening cherry cream over buttery crust has me wanting to join a cotillion, or engage in whatever quaint traditions will score me an endless supply of such homestyle treats. If I weren't trying to stay anonymous, I'd have a great chance to ask Stegner how to score them. Clad in her baggy chef's coat and sharp ponytail, she comes out to chat with folks in the dining room, not like a timid cook, but with the enthusiasm of a legendary maitre d'.

In fact, everyone here is enthusiastic. Service isn't over the top—there's no napkin folding when my friend leaves his seat to go to the men's room—but it doesn't need to be. It's personal and fun. Tonight, our waiter jokes around with us and knows the details of everything on the menu we ask about, down to the mild flower perfume in the day lily sauce on a nicely seared hunk of salmon.

If there's any criticism, it's that dishes like seared tuna with bok choy, smoked salmon pizza, peekytoe crab with avocado, the previously mentioned Chez Panisse-worthy beet salad, and a dry, too-floury muk muk (lava) cake read like the greatest hits of the '80s and early '90s. But, then again, the bits of shitake add a beautiful, earthy bite to the sauce underneath the tuna. In the beet salad, the smoke from the hazelnuts cuts the richness of the cheese, and the sweetness is the mark of an inspired chef. As '80s classics go, Stegner and Bumbaris' dishes are not so much New Kids on the Block's *Hangin' Tough*, but more durable and infectious, like Soft Cell's *Tainted Love*.

That style of slight revision on classic gourmet is probably why Prairie Fire looks like Sunda for older people. But, you know, I kind of dig it. I've spent so much of my time in dining rooms where people measure their self-worth by the cost of a shot of vodka or the crowd they're keeping. At Prairie Fire, this set already knows they belong. Or frankly, they don't give a damn if they don't. ■