



Mastro's

RATING: ★★

520 N. Dearborn St.,
312.521.5100

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: *Ralph Lauren.*

WHAT TO ORDER: *Oysters Rockefeller, rack of lamb, butter cake.*

WHEN TO GO: *Laid-back Sunday nights when there's a lazy supper club vibe.*

WHAT TO KNOW: *The lounge, M Bar, is a cool place to score a smoking dry ice Martini and listen to live piano music and new world cabaret singers.*

WHO GOES: *Young Lincoln Park and Gold Coast families, and anyone with an expense account.*

WHAT IT COSTS: *Appetizers \$7-\$39; entrées \$29-\$65; sides \$9-\$38; desserts \$10.*

MEAT YOUR MAKER *Above, clockwise from left: One of the 20,000-square-foot restaurant's dining rooms; king crab black truffle gnocchi; bone-in rib eye. Below: The signature dry ice Martini.*



Raising the Steaks

Beverly Hills behemoth Mastro's puts the charm back into the Chicago steakhouse

| By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Anthony Tahlier |

We don't want nobody that nobody sent.

That's allegedly what a cigar-chomping Chicago political boss told future congressman Abner Mikva when he tried to get his start in local politics by volunteering, unbidden, for Adlai Stevenson's presidential campaign in 1951.

Walk into a classic Chicago steakhouse today and you're likely to get the same message. Try scoring a prime table at Gibsons on a Friday night without dropping a \$4,000 tip like Johnny Depp did last July. Don't even think about sitting in the bar level at Gene & Georgetti if you don't have an official government business parking pass. Heck, even if you have reservations, the clipboard toting maître d' will likely make you sweat it out for 30 minutes before you get a table.

Sure, Frank Sinatra's butt cheeks may have made their imprint on that burnished banquet long before you were born, but Ol' Blue Eyes and the like made things worse for the common man. Steakhouse owners drunk on celebrity lore have treated ages of diners to gruff service. Once a monument to elegance and

celebration, the local Chicago steakhouse has become a dusty diorama of nostalgia.

As such, I was excited when Mastro's, a West Coast steakhouse chain founded in Scottsdale, Arizona, announced that it was taking over the former Blue Water Grill space on Dearborn. As a Chicago writer, I'm predisposed to hating carpet-bagging mini franchises—but when the locals abdicate their responsibility, they deserve a little competition.

It's only when I arrive in the wood-paneled, marble-floored lobby of Mastro's that I get worried. I spot a framed photo of a smug gray-haired man sporting a fist-sized Windsor knot and toasting the foyer with what looks like a quadruple Martini. Nothing says "your grandpa's steakhouse" like a mini-billboard of the 1970s ideal of an oil tycoon. (This turns out to be the founder, Dominic Mastro.)

But, my reservation is honored immediately, and I settle into a comfy, modern leather wingback chair. Bathed in the glow from a miniature table lamp, I realize the piano man in the lounge CONTINUED...

...CONTINUED is singing a jazzy cover of the Ramones "I Wanna Be Sedated." Mastro's is likely not even my father's steakhouse.

The champagne-colored draperies are so lush that even from 10 feet away I feel swaddled in their majesty. The walls are lined with an abundance of mirrors and glinting beads that shimmer like a silvery curtain. This softness is tempered with tufted dark leather banquettes and a regal red and gold carpeting so evocative of classic masculinity I can almost whiff the Old Spice. The interior design is like a mash-up of George Clooney and Brad Pitt, simultaneously pretty and rugged. In Mastro's, we have the first metrosexual steakhouse of Chicago. Though, there aren't any celebrities in the house tonight—just suburban dads

in cashmere V-neck sweaters and their sons, draped in Abercrombie flannel.

Our food runner brings water immediately. With his natty white waistcoat, shaved head and frowning Fu Manchu moustache, he looks like a villain straight out of central casting for a James Bond flick. Before he can call in the mechanical octopi to eat us, our waitress, a cheerful *Terms of Endearment*-era Debra Winger doppelgänger, steps in to review the nightly specials.

She is doting, motherly, and expresses concern that our order may be too large—a 180 from the upselling going on at other local steakhouses.

She genuinely seems distressed when she can't recall that the gratin on top of the oysters Rockefeller is a blend of Parmesan and anisette, and has to ask the kitchen for the answer. Though we barely register her return; the soft, warm oyster belly, mounded with tender threads of spinach, a hint of bacon smoke and the creamy gratin, commands most of our attention.

Food writers generally don't like steakhouses because there isn't much craft or imagination in searing a hunk of meat over flame. That being said, Mastro's captivates because it delivers solid classics like that

Rockefeller. The lobster bisque, featuring a raft of cream, the heady waft of brandy and a buried treasure of succulent claws is straight out of the *Larousse Gastronomique* playbook.

We appreciate our server's attention so much, we pretend not to notice when her serving tongs lose their grip, sending a perfectly pink lamb chop careening to the floor. There's no time to react anyway, for she delivers a sizzling replacement from the kitchen seconds later. Though there would have been enough chops to feed a hungry battalion of troops without it, I'm glad she brought another. The crust is crispy, the interior melts and the seasoning is a perfect mix of salt and smoke. This is the best cut of the night.

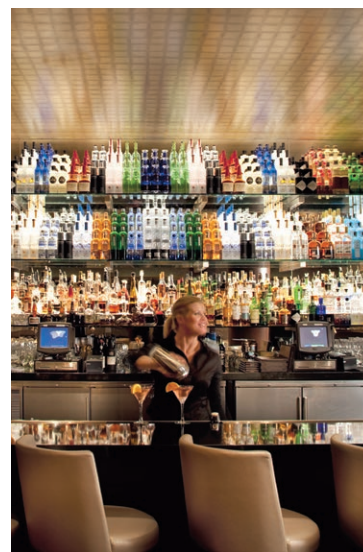
The bone-in rib eye, roughly the size of a Brontosaurus, could use a touch more salt. Debra Winger pimps Mastro's seafood acumen, but I think the lady doth protest too much, as our swordfish was mushy and the Alaskan king crab black truffle gnocchi features pungent crab and scent-free winter truffles that taste bland.

I love the Parmesan-and-herb-crust sweet potato fries, sporting crisp outsides and starchy centers, but the portion size is a solution to third-world hunger. Throughout the night, we see at least 10 orders of half-eaten bowls of fries returning to the kitchen. Our waitress tells us that tables of eight will occasionally finish a batch.

On the other hand, we're okay with the fact that the signature butter cake is the size of a modest battleship, as no member of our group forgoes a spoonful (or five) of the hot, gooey cake, topped with oozing sour cream cheese, a crispy brûléed sugar crust and a dollop of extra-chilled ice cream.

After the rich dessert and the hefty meal, I go to bed early. Actually, I pass out from gluttony. My cell phone wakes me the next morning. It's Mastro's hostess, inquiring about my visit the night before, a standard practice at the restaurant. As she asks if there was anything she could have done to make my experience better, I think: Hey, a nobody just became somebody. ■

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From far left: A build-your-own seafood tower; M Bar, the restaurant's more casual lounge; a cocktail from the extensive menu.