



IT'S BAAACCKKK! Clockwise from top left: Wood oven-roasted pork shoulder with root vegetables, fresh bacon and marinated Napa cabbage; wood-fired flatbread; deviled egg crostini with crimini mushrooms, celery leaf and tarragon; Avec's dining room



The Comeback Kid

After a tragic fire closed its kitchen last year, West Loop pioneer Avec is back and better than ever.

| By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier |

Exciting, energetic and a little claustrophobic, the old Avec—that is, before the grease chute fire that closed the restaurant down for almost three months last year—was the dining equivalent of a sweaty punk show without the band. The tiny restaurant, lined with Western red cedar and bursting with chefs, scenesters and foodies every night of the week, always seemed to be a bit out of control—with crowded tables, overtaxed servers and dinner plates swirling with a mixture of sauces from shared dish after shared dish.

The food, however, a mashup of Mediterranean, Italian and Spanish flavors, was so good you forgave these things. You also assumed that there was little that could be done. The place was built to seat 60, and often there were half that many people out on the sidewalk waiting for a table. Avec does not take reservations. (On a nice day, the wait is cushioned by outdoor wine service: 1/4-liter pours from a focused list of French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese varieties. In the winter, there's no such vino reprieve.)

That was also before the famous Michelin ratings guide swooped into town, ignored Avec and awarded hipster paradise Longman & Eagle a star instead.

As Avec executive chef Paul Kahan tweeted after the Michelin announcement, "In the beginning they didn't understand the Clash either. Avec rules."

It's true, Avec was an iconoclast, but that was a long time ago. When it opened in 2003, Charlie Trotter's and Tru were still duking it out for culinary supremacy. Back then Avec was the spot that launched a thousand charcuterie plates, the father of jeans-required dining in Chicago. Longman & Eagle likely wouldn't exist without its example. But, as Trotter can tell you, people don't care about the past.

Given time to reflect while the restaurant was being rebuilt, the Avec team clearly took notice. Except for my meal at Avenues under Curtis Duffy, I have not had a better dining experience anywhere in Chicago in the last two years than the multiple times I ate at Avec during the past few months.

I don't know if it's the new eight-burner Vulcan stove with the *plancha* (a flat-top grill) designed for searing at intensely high temperatures, but the Avec team is looking more inspired than a winning high school football team, unveiling a lineup of new dishes ranging from whole-roasted foie gras **CONTINUED...**

Avec

RATING ★★★★★

615 W. Randolph St.,

312.377.2002,

avecrestaurant.com

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 *Everything goes;*

sleeve tattoos and beards preferred

WHAT TO ORDER *Chorizo-stuffed*

dates, wood oven-roasted pork shoulder, chocolate crêpes

WHAT TO KNOW *Avec opens at 3:30PM*

erving the full menu. Maybe you can make early-bird dining super cool. If not, at least you won't have to wait two hours for a table.

WHO GOES *Chefs after a shift, club*

chicks looking for stellar pre-dance nosh and foodies

WHAT IT COSTS *Small plates \$5-\$13;*

large plates \$14.50-\$20.50; desserts \$6



Clockwise from top left: Koren Grieverson, Avec's chef de cuisine, at work; roasted dorade with charred orange; chorizo-stuffed dates; chocolate crêpes filled with mascarpone



...CONTINUED with roasted pears, candied walnuts and rosemary to deviled egg crostini with crimini mushrooms, celery leaf and tarragon, a welcome addition to the recent influx of highbrow deviled eggs in this city.

Koren Grieverson, chef de cuisine, is the Nastia Liukin of the kitchen. Like the Olympic all-around gymnastics gold medalist, she rules her craft with grace, balance and precision, turning out small plates to 45 seats and 15 bar stools that look exactly the same as they did pre-fire (the flames were extinguished before they could reach the dining room).

Hearty cubes of her housemade panzanella soak up the juices of chicken drizzled with the buttery, funky dripping fat of foie gras—the perfect wintry riff on a traditional summer dish from Tuscany. The richness is tempered with the lifting acidity of pineapple vinegar.

Any self-respecting cook would have apples, celery, almonds and apple cider vinegar in his or her pantry. Few would think to accent this quartet with wafers of creamy Manchego, or know how to shave the celery just so, blunting its crispness to focus the palate on its savory flavor. Nor would they know to contrast the succulence of a ripe apple with the satisfying crunch of salty Marcona almonds. Grieverson does all of this in her apple salad (a dish that makes liberal use of the term, as it contains no lettuce).

A lesser cook would likely mask the smoky wood-roasted dorade with a blanket of sauce, instead of lightly perfuming it with herbes de Provence—the classic blend of dried fennel, basil, thyme and other herbs artfully mixes sweet and savory—and serving it alongside a charred orange. A single spritz adds just the right brightness to the plate.

Though the menu is full of new dishes, there are still old favorites on offer, like chorizo-stuffed Medjool dates: islands of dried fruit wrapped in bacon and swimming in a piquillo pepper-tomato lagoon. Outside of Grant Achatz's black truffle explosion and Mindy Segal's "Cake and Shake," there's

probably no dish so iconic, or synonymous with a Chicago chef as this one. Every table orders a batch, or two, and who can blame them. The dish is a porktastic symphony of the sauce—at once smoky, sweet and dangerously spicy—and the sweet, meaty dates.

When it's time for dessert, pastry chef Patrick Fahy proves he belongs in the lineage of the accomplished Blackbird restaurant group (formally known as 4KH Inc.; owners Paul Kahan, Donnie Madia, Eduard Seitan and Rick Diarmit crafted the acronym in reference to themselves as four knuckleheads). His eggy chocolate crêpes, stuffed with sweet mascarpone and coated in the rich, glossy sheen of a house-made redux of Nutella, deliver the sophistication you'd expect from someone who spent a year as pastry assistant at French Laundry.

Then again, the food was never really in question. Now, the service isn't, either. On a lazy Sunday night, as soon as a few regulars enter the room, a *Cheers*-like "Hey, Norm" greeting bellows from the whole Avec staff. The kitchen offers to cook buttered noodles off-menu for my 4-year-old son. We refuse, but to even have the option at this level of dining is unexpected.

Then again, anyone can keep it together in a half-full dining room. The real test of Avec's improvement comes at 7:30PM on a Saturday night.

I'm happy to report that with folks piling up at the door shooting daggers at those of us lucky enough to commandeer a table during prime time, plates were changed out every couple of courses and my mini carafe of Pont de Gassac, a luscious red blend of Cabernet, Merlot and Syrah, was never empty. Other than the occasional extended time between courses, there was little to quibble over. Best of all, when my wife got up to use the restroom, the staff refolded her napkin and placed it gingerly on the table. Great service and some of the best food in town? Avec is clearly the Michelin guide's most glaring omission. ■