



Hubbard Inn

RATING ★★

110 W. Hubbard St.,
312.222.1331

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.

HOURS

Mon.–Fri. 11AM to 2AM;
Sat. 11AM to 3AM

WHAT TO WEAR

Ladies, break out your shiniest, tallest boots and matching short dresses. Dudes: blazers and jeans

WHAT TO ORDER

Le Royal burger, pan-fried sweet breads, cheesecake

WHAT TO KNOW

Hubbard Inn always serves great meat; Thursday through Saturday it's a bit of a meat market

WHO GOES

Young Loop professionals looking for a post-work drink, foodies looking to try the next hot restaurant

PRICES

Small plates, \$6–\$18; burgers and bar snacks, \$2–\$16; desserts, \$8

MIX MASTERS Clockwise from top left: The charming, old-school decor at Hubbard Inn; the lamb burger; the asparagus and mushroom ragout flatbread

Inn for a Treat

The newest venture from the team behind LaSalle Power Company takes it up a notch with charming ambience and European-inspired fare. | By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier |

The interior of Hubbard Inn looks as if the Goodman Theatre's prop room blew up, was swept across the river and landed in a perfectly arranged maelstrom of antique-store chic. I'm talking flickering candelabra; throne-like dining chairs; an enormous book-lined hutch; a gallery's worth of paintings (including mischievous portraits of well-dressed monkeys and what looks like a portrait of a young Joseph Stalin) and bus station-style benches. The dining room simultaneously channels a Victorian library, a French brasserie and van Gogh's studio.

In this era of slapdash beer halls, where tiny storefronts outfitted with a little blonde wood and some exposed brick pass for sophistication, Hubbard Inn's 8,000-square-foot bi-level space is a castle. When the doorman flips open the glass-paneled front doors and beckons toward the warm glow of globe lanterns, my wife and I feel like the *Harry Potter* kids going to Hogwarts for the first time.

And, at least early in the week, pretty much everything about the Hubbard Inn experience is magical. Tables are filled with a mix of canoodling couples,

burgeoning families and bustling professionals, but sauntering over to the bar and snagging a stool to sip on a Hemingway cocktail (rum, Maraschino liqueur, lime, grapefruit juice and simple syrup) before dinner is still pretty easy. Though consulting mixologist Ben Schiller of The Boka Group isn't tending bar, the staff is trained well. The astringent grapefruit of the Hemingway cuts through the caramelized rum notes and lifts the syrupy Maraschino. And since the whole restaurant is inspired by Papa and his travels, it's fitting that the drink is done right—perfectly bright and balanced.

After we're seated, I switch to wine. For his lush, slightly funky Grenache/Syrah blends I adore Rhone winemaker Michel Chapoutier. One look at the wine list and I know I want a glass of his Belleruche rouge. However, before I can order, our waitress, like a mind-reading Voodoo queen, tells us she just had the Chapoutier in a tasting and loved it. Sold.

If there's any quibble with the menu—which features small plates of everything from braised short ribs to truffle oil-infused deviled eggs to brown butter sauced scallops—



MAGICAL MEAL
Clockwise from far left:
The bacon-wrapped
Medjool dates; the
first-floor dining area,
the red and yellow beet
salad; a classically
dressed bartender



it's that it isn't breaking much new ground. But Hubbard Inn chef Bob Zrenner, a vet of Tru and North Pond, knows that good cooking isn't always about reinventing the wheel. Updating classics is a skill in its own. Case in point: the Le Royal, a thick, juicy, mineral-rich, perfectly medium rare Angus burger topped by a seared, melting lobe of foie gras and tangy tomato and served with a side of wine-accented caramelized onion jam. The pillowy, buttery and lightly floured bun puts the Le Royal on par with the celebrated burgers served at such Chicago standouts as Kuma's Corner and Rosebud.

Everything we receive this night is executed perfectly. And nothing is better than pan-fried sweet breads piled with a salad of walnut, apple, fennel, mint and a drizzle of vanilla maple syrup. The crispy fried offal with a melting interior is like chicken fried custard. The crunch of the walnuts and the sweet/sour interplay of fennel and vanilla maple topped with the spicy bracing mint is unique and proves Zrenner can execute classics and innovate. The dish couldn't be any better unless maybe it were responsible for the birth of my child, which, as it turns out, maybe it is...

Stuffed, we skip dessert, and the sweetbreads are the last thing my wife eats before she goes into labor and delivers our second son, Beckett Wilde, a few hours later.

If this is all sounding like a Gabriel García Márquez novel, well, wait for the weekend (which starts on a

Thursday in this part of River North). A visit then and the bar is packed three deep. The pleasant buzz from a week before has broken into a deafening roar and I have to yell at my dining companion to be heard.

The braised short rib we try this evening is tender, its well-seasoned shards glistening with red wine glaze; however, without the usual restaurant trick of adding a quick pan-saute caramelized crust, there's little textural contrast. But the brown butter-sauced scallops capture my interest once more, if only because Zrenner skips a tired sweet potato garnish and instead serves a velvety pumpkin purée perfumed with sage and hazelnut as garnish.

A double thick cheesecake ringed by a hefty wall of graham cracker and a fudgy flourless chocolate cake soothe any misgivings we have. The only miss here is that the jalapeño strawberry sauce on the chocolate cake has absolutely no heat or flavor. The bigger issue is that while the savory menu, divided between bar snacks, flatbreads, sandwiches and small plates clocks in at almost 50 items, these are the only two desserts on offer.

Still, though the second visit wasn't quite as fruitful (literally) as the first, I spotted owners Adolfo Garcia, David Mitria and Daniel Alonso busing tables, speaking to servers and asking diners for feedback on both visits. They're clearly in the game. If they can find a way to mitigate the pressure of weekend crowds, I suspect Hubbard Inn is here to stay. ■

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