



RUSTIC FARE From left: A view of Bistronomic's impressive wine collection; a grilled cheese sandwich made with Great Hill blue cheese and a mizuna salad with grapes and balsamic honey butter

Bistronomic

RATING ★★

840 N. Wabash Ave.,
312.944.8400

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, ambiance and service.

The Simple Life

One of Chicago's most skilled chefs pares it down—but ups his game—at a new Gold Coast destination. | *By Michael Nigrant* | *Photography by Anthony Tablier* |

You don't want Jay-Z rapping nursery rhymes. Sure, maybe he penned a few lines like "roses are red..." in his journals growing up in the Marcy Projects in New York, but his genius is manifest in the sharp parsing of ghetto life with complex rhyme schemes. If he stuck to traditional meter and botany, well, he'd have serious problems. This is initially how I feel about chef Martial Noguier and his new Gold Coast restaurant, Bistronomic. Why would one of Chicago's best chefs set his sights on simple rustic French food?

Noguier easily makes my top 10 of Chicago chefs. Considering only consistency and technical prowess, he might even crack the top five. He is one of those guys—and when I say "guys," I mean chefs Trotter, Achatz, Curtis Duffy or Bruce Sherman—who can put 10 ingredients on a plate not out of ego, but because each one truly elevates the dish. If Noguier only uses three elements, then he kills you with a jeweler's precision, whether whipping up a super velvety purée, a crystal clear sugar glaze or a tiny frenched quail thigh. I've eaten more than a thousand dishes since I last had his food at Café des Architectes, but I still reminisce about his tender baby octopus and succulent Madagascar shrimp coddled in honey caramel sauce.

Until now, I've only known Noguier and his talents when he was cooking for other people. At Bistronomic, there's no hotel overlords, as at the Sofitel, and no silent owner Michael Jordan demanding Delmonico steak from him as at One Sixtyblue. This is now Noguier's show, a partnership with John Ward and Matt Fisher, the owners of the restaurant's former incarnation, Eve. When most people get the keys to the kingdom, they hit another gear. Achatz could have peaked at the four-star-rated Trio, but now he's got the seventh best restaurant in the world. Noguier instead decided, like seemingly every other chef these days, to divide plates as "small," "medium" or "large" and to take refuge in a more casual and classic atmosphere than at Eve or Café des Architectes.

There's nothing wrong with that. I like the thick dark-wood slat blinds, the white drum lamps and the film noir lighting scheme in the dining room. Though it's all reds, whites and blacks and conjures a White Stripes video, it's much warmer than the blue and silver glam ice palace vibe of Eve.

The cauliflower veloute soup appetizer is just as warm as the interior design. It's creamy and indulgent. The scrim of Pleasant Ridge Reserve (Wisconsin's answer to artisanal Gruyère on top adds a nutty **CONTINUED...**

WHAT TO WEAR *It's pretty dark in here, so shiny dresses and flashy Eric Overstreet from Modeta Family fancy-cuffed dress shirts are a must*

WHAT TO ORDER *Parmesan gnocchi, pan-roasted duck magret, hazelnut bars*

WHAT TO KNOW *There's a cool back room behind the bar for drop-in dining*

WHO GOES *A neighborhood spectrum of empty nesters and the young and the restless*

WHAT IT COSTS *Small plates \$6-\$9, medium plates \$8-\$12, large plates \$17-\$26, desserts \$8*

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...CONTINUED twist. But, generally, the dish is one-note: rich, *Trump*-rich. The old Noguier would have popped in a little lifting acidity, maybe a cloud of lemon foam.

The fish soup, another small plate with its brew of briny funk, licorice tarragon perfume and bitter floral saffron, conjures a wharf outside Marseilles where grubby fishermen, their woolen caps pulled tight against a squall, huddle for warmth around a roiling dented vat of the stuff. But there is more delight in the nostalgia of that imagined moment than in the flavor of what is at best a solid riff on bouillabaisse you've had a thousand times.

Rusticity, and redemption, is carried through on a rough-hewn shingle of pink pork pâté (Noguier's mother's recipe). The pepper-flecked rich pork is tempered by winy mustard and tangy, vinegary cornichons.

The fishermen elbow their way back into my consciousness in marshmallow-like nuggets of bay scallops swimming in a lake of spicy piperade (roasted pepper relish) and the bitter, smoky coffee-like essence of Picholine olive. This is the Noguier I love.

He sustains that kind of complexity with a medium-sized plate of pillowy gnocchi punched up by a bright hidden brunoise of celery root and in tiny tea service-worthy grilled blue cheese brioche sandwiches drizzled with hazelnut oil. Noguier triumphs with luscious pink duck breast tossed with a liquor of orange sauce and a salad of punchy, zesty cilantro. But, the filet *au poivre*, requested medium rare, is medium-going-on-braised short rib. Its contrasting crispy pan lacquer is washed away by a cognac sauce evaporated of any interesting grapey essence.

Throughout, the meal is yin and yang, all the way down to Baked Alaska, an icy over-crystallized vanilla ice cream encrusted with crispy roasted almonds bursting with hints of cherry and topped with a wicked Guy Fieri hairdo-like tufted raft of meringue. But the fudgy chocolate and toasted crunch hazelnut bars, a haute Kit Kat of sorts, buoy one through.

It's true I am looking at this like a professional. As a casual diner, I believe Bistronomic is certainly what this Gold Coast neighborhood (a haven for otherwise big fat expense account steaks and steroidal, overcooked, out-of-season asparagus) needs. It is a chef-driven restaurant offering up an array of interesting local cheeses and fortifying ruddy charcuterie, a home base for girlfriends about to prowl the clubs or for nearby high-rise denizens to close down the evening with a glass of red Bordeaux.

I can appreciate that. But I love when craft transcends art. I revere the architect Louis Sullivan for his wild tendril and leaf ornamented friezes. I do not want him to become a bricklayer. No doubt if he did, what a wall he would build: plumb-line straight, serpentine and majestic. But, it would remain, after all, a brick wall. ■



GOLD COAST GRUB
Clockwise from far left: The Chocolate Hazelnut Bar; a chalkboard featuring the daily specials; the house-made country pâté; the Bistronomic dining area