



Sunda

RATING: ★★★

110 W. Illinois St., 312.644.0500

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: *A vintage Nirvana T-shirt (no reissues please) and Hugo Boss dark denim.*

WHAT TO ORDER: *Food Buddha's crispy rice (with American Kobe tartare), crispy pata, banana fritters.*

WHEN TO GO: *For laid-back lunches. Dinner reservations are tough to score on short notice.*

WHAT TO KNOW: *The complimentary green foil wrapped candy is much better than the red foil wrapped candy.*

WHO GOES: *Ladies with a 34-inch or longer inseam and that guy from the Dos Equis 'The Most Interesting Man in the World' advertisements.*

WHAT IT COSTS: *Appetizers \$4-16; entrées \$14-34; desserts \$8-10.*

HOT SEATS *Above, clockwise from top left: Bamboo fish; Sunda's dining room; potstickers with braised oxtail, caramelized onion jus and "white" wasabi cream; a peek into the private dining room. Below: Crispy pork and shrimp Shanghai-style egg rolls with Boston lettuce and dipping sauces.*



Triple Play

First Rokit, then Underground, now Sunda—the Rokit Ranch crew scores again

| By Michael Nagrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier |

I like it when a restaurant owner dines in his own establishment. It makes me feel like I'm not being poisoned. Yet tonight, with co-owner Billy Dec holding court at the center table of his River North hotspot Sunda, my Mai Tai isn't going down that smoothly.

The ball-capped boy wonder of Chicago nightlife is playin' it as cool as his French-polished, black bamboo-appointed room. Noshing next to a twiggy female, he surveys the space with a steely gaze and a slightly upturned smirk. Dec's laid-back yet authoritative claim to his domain strikes me as a hipster Chicago version of Al Pacino's Carlito Brigante.

Like the fictional, high-rollin' club owner, Dec's got a great legend. He's a scrappy kid who went from bouncer to bar owner in seconds flat, got a law degree and is studying business at Harvard. He gets personal audiences with Obama and Oprah, and his close friends are David "Ross Geller" Schwimmer and Jeremy "Ari Gold" Piven. Heck, this magazine made Dec its cover boy in April. While I have no personal

beef with the guy, as a journalist, I'm paid to be an eyes-wide-open suspect of such seemingly effortless perfection. So, though I'm already a glass of nicely dry, grapefruit-perfumed Clean Slate Riesling and half a well-balanced Mai Tai into my meal, I'm skeptical that the Pied Piper of the late-night bar-top dancing set (Rokit and, moreso, Underground) can also deploy a great restaurant.

Mostly, though, I'm cranky. Six weeks after opening, the Sunda crew is still not honoring my reservation. They ask me to wait in the front lounge until a table opens, which I'd do if there was any room. My inclination is to compare the cramped black-lacquer confines to a clown car, but when was the last time you saw Bozo wearing calf-muscle-killing crocodile Louboutin pumps or a Ferragamo leather jacket? Sunda is the culinary playground for the genetically gifted. I have never witnessed so many swan-necked, giraffe-legged enchantresses beyond a *Vanity Fair* spread, nor this CONTINUED...



“I have never witnessed so many swan-necked, giraffe-legged enchantresses beyond a *Vanity Fair* spread, nor this many Oliver Peoples’ eyeglass-wearing investment bankers outside of *Wall Street*.”



Above: Sunda’s sushi bar. Top, from left: Watermelon nigiri with chili-caramelized watermelon, peppergrass, unagi “bacon,” mango and lime; the cocktail lounge.

...CONTINUED many Oliver Peoples’ eyeglass-wearing investment bankers outside of the movie *Wall Street*.

A boy like me from Kansas (well, Detroit, anyway) could get lost here. Used to eating Sunda-style fare, like Thai fried chicken or crispy Shanghai-style pork- and shrimp-filled egg rolls—aka lumpia, or in the Sunda parlance, “Loompya”—in low-key mom-and-pop storefronts, I’m enraptured by this Asian Disneyland of modern creature comforts, from the fluttering installation of 1,200 bamboo fish over the sushi bar to the grand exposed-bulb chandelier in the foyer to our server, an eager armchair chef who knows every dish as if she sourced the tuna from Tokyo’s Tsukiji fish market herself. I’ve told myself many times that ambience and service matter as much to a meal as the quality of ink used on the restaurant’s receipt, and yet at Sunda, they are everything.

The Loompya, parsimonious on juicy garlic pork, and the chicken—slathered with tongue-searing peppers but lacking a crispy enough skin—are not nearly as good as the iconic versions I’ve had at *Isla Pilipina* or

Spoon Thai, two time-honored Asian spots on Chicago’s North Side, but they are unique and satisfying efforts. And neither of those places offers the brontosaurus-sized crispy pata, a deep-fried pork leg with a side of garlic-hued foie gras sauce that I gnash at with abandon. My companion, a horseradish avoider, is enchanted with the “white” wasabi cream (i.e. horseradish) dipped potstickers filled with tender shreds of braised oxtail.

That’s the lesson at Sunda: Dishes that do not exist elsewhere, like the Food Buddha’s (chef Rodelio Aglibot’s nickname) crispy rice, are the ticket. The seared American Kobe perched on a soy-glazed square of crispy rice, though cooked beyond its advertised “tartare” state, is as satisfying as a kebab at a Devon Street Pakistani joint. As Aglibot’s modern interpretation of Japanese nigiri—a prime example of the chef’s touted “new Asian” style—the chili-dolloped, smoky bite redefines the standard for sushi-style nibbles.

I find the same inventiveness in my final savory dish, which is smartly recommended by our mod-eyeglassed server: sweet, firm cubes of caramelized watermelon capped with tendrils of crispy, salty unagi. The only failure: One of the pieces of unagi has a faint ammoniac waft, having apparently overstayed its welcome in the Sunda kitchen.

For nose-upturned gourmands and ethnic food purists, such twists may not sit well. Sunda will never be mistaken for a boutique operation. It is instead a single P.F. Chang’s run by the iron fist of fun-loving dictators. But, especially after the banana fritters, deep-fried and lemongrass-cream-dipped bites that I throw back like French fries, this particular reviewer, who considers P.F. Chang’s one of the best national chains, is sold.

As for those dictators—Brad Young, Arturo Gomez and Dec—one thing’s certain: Their dedication, especially Dec’s, is impressive. Yes, he may spend his working hours sipping and eating, but he’s not the typical rich dilettante throwing a party for his friends under the guise of running a restaurant. Dec works it hard, so much so that you admire him and wonder if there is any chink in his armor. Maybe he’s got a crooked pinky or an ugly big toe? All I can do is wonder, for my own table at Sunda isn’t quite close enough to check. ■