



AVENUES

RATING: ★★★★★

108 E. Superior St.,
312.573.6754

What the stars mean: 1 = fair, some noteworthy qualities; 2 = good, above average; 3 = very good, well above norm; 4 = excellent, among the area's best; 5 = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambiance and service.

WHAT TO WEAR: *Fearless dudes can leave the jacket at home. Anything from St. John suits to Saint Laurent silk dresses for the gals.*

WHAT TO ORDER: *The 15-course tasting menu. For just \$25 more than the eight-course, it's well worth it.*

WHEN TO GO: *Check out the golden Michigan Avenue glow from the dining room on a bustling Saturday night.*

WHAT TO KNOW: *Serious home cooks who want to pick up some chops should ask to sit at the chef's bar and watch the action.*

WHO GOES: *Gold Coasters whose retirement funds were secure before the first Great Depression, budding chefs and special occasion celebrators.*

WHAT IT COSTS: *\$15-\$45 for à la carte options; \$75, \$115 or \$140 for 4, 8 or 15 courses (available upon request).*

Clockwise from top left: Chefs work in the kitchen; wine racks; sweet king crab in cucumber broth with a sugar tuile, orange steelhead roe and Kalamansi orange purée. Below: Wagyu beef cheeks in cannelloni pasta with shiso flowers and micro-greens.



Electric Avenues

Chef Curtis Duffy sparks a taste-bud revolution at the Peninsula Hotel

| By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Dave Slivinski and Anthony Tablier |

The first time I walked in to Avenues, the polished restaurant on the main lobby level of the Peninsula Chicago, the maître d' looked me up and down as if I were Daisy Duke stepping in to Buckingham Palace. He clucked, sighed and informed me that I had to leave. The problem was not my chalk-stripe suit coat, which followed the "jackets only" policy, but my freshly pressed jeans. I started to walk out. But, just as I turned away, an Egyptian-cotton-wearing savior, then-chef de cuisine Graham Elliot Bowles, emerged from the open kitchen, raised his fiercely tattooed forearms and waved me over to the chef's bar for what turned out to be one of the top meals of my life.

Three years later, charged with checking out Avenues' new chef de cuisine, Curtis Duffy, I begrudgingly tuck myself into a suit and wonder how a meal from Duffy, a talented but deliberate alum of Trotter's, Trio and, most recently, Alinea, will compare to Bowles' whimsical, pop culture-infused fare. Mostly, I worry that Duffy's Avenues

is going to be "Alinea: The Sequel," with the potential for "been there, done that" boredom to creep in. Though there's no such thing as too many visits to Alinea, as a diner I yearn for a different chef to do his own thing—that's where the excitement of trying a new spot lies.

My first surprise comes, again, upon entry, where my wife and I are met by a gracious maître d' and immediately led past the invisible velvet rope. The only two other guys in the room, a prepster in a lime green J. Crew pullover and an older man clad in a Brooks Brothers gingham button-up (this one accompanied by a much younger woman), are jacketless. I guess things are now—cue the 1985 Phil Collins album—"No Jacket Required."

"We want to get away from that whole idea of having to feel stuffy," says Duffy when we speak a week later. "You go to Europe or Spain, you go to any Michelin three-star, you're going to go there in jeans and a T-shirt, guaranteed. At Michel Bras, the people beside me had a dog they were feeding under the table. They just wanted to continued..."



...continued be relaxed. That's what we need."

What's more, the Peninsula has updated Avenues' stodgy country club look since my last visit, outfitting the dining room with black lacquered walls, monochromatic art and mod teardrop vases adorned with sharp flame-colored calla lilies (the vases and flowers change weekly). The prairie-style stained glass remains, but the commitment to better match the progressive menu is appreciated.

After a few dishes, however, I realize that no décor can do justice to this cuisine. The 15-course dinner (Avenues also offers a four- and eight-course menu) starts with caviar with Meyer lemon sphere, followed by white truffle shaved over a frozen parmesan circle, tapiocas and chive. The frozen parmesan, a savory sorbet-like sphere, is like an icy lightning bolt that opens my palate for the meal to come.

Third up is a bowl of sweet king crab swimming in cold cucumber broth, sealed with a clear sugar tuile and topped with salty, delicate orange steelhead roe and dollops of Kalamansi orange purée. The delight of cracking the sugar crust (think a savory seafood crème brûlée) and biting into the clean mixture of sweet, acid and salt has me squealing with the verve of a teenage girl who has just spotted the Jonas Brothers. The dish is not only a visceral delight, but an intellectual one. Cracking the tuile feels like a metaphorical breaking through of the Lake Michigan ice to reach warm waves and the first days of beach weather.

I peek around the room, trying to see if others feel like I do, but my attention is stolen by a loud man in the corner trashing his two ex-wives to a potential new sweetie while sipping an expensive, oaky, meal-clouding Chardonnay. While there are plenty of trophy bottles like this at Avenues, the abundance of food-friendly, high-acid Rieslings and Gruner Veltliners available, including the grapefruity Nigl we select, makes this a smart wine list.

Next up is rich, tummy-coating Wagyu beef cheeks swaddled in tender cannelloni pasta topped with what look like freshly bloomed shiso flowers and verdant micro-greens. Duffy's colors, compositions and garnishes are so natural, if you walked by one of his plates in the middle of a forest preserve, you'd regard it as part of the flora and fauna.

His flavors skew that way, too. Luscious nuggets of black cod are accented by snail caviar—salty and earthy pearlescent bubbles that taste like the morning air after a night camping out—mingled with the sweetness of a glinting terrine of baby carrots.

The only thing that doesn't satisfy is a noodle made



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of cocoa powder that is too rubbery. This is served with an otherwise inspired lardo-draped Kurobuta pork loin girded by smoked paprika-laced bread and mineral-tinged miner's lettuce.

Over 17 courses (Duffy is known to throw in some extras) there are no jarring constructions, no word play or menu items in quotation marks, no custom-designed wax soup bowls, and no lasers. The execution is on par with Alinea, but this is not Alinea *deux*. Here, the purity of the plate is what makes Duffy's food his own.

Duffy, who once served as pastry chef at Trio, brings equal aplomb to his sweet offerings, including a Belgian chocolate cake swaddled in wild strawberries so tasty that my wife, who has stopped eating three courses ago out of fullness, licks her plate clean. The bright, fruity bursts of strawberry with the berry perfume of the sweet Barolo wine sauce lighten and accentuate the intensely fudgy slice. I would have checked for the Chardonnay-sipping loud-mouth's reaction, but 10 minutes ago, he had waived dessert off due to "time constraints." Ahh, karma. ■



Clockwise from top left: Chef de cuisine Curtis Duffy works behind the chef's bar; the main dining room; Belgian chocolate cake with wild strawberries and sweet Barolo wine sauce.