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## Publisher's Note

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We know how you feel: Between a long winter and very few genuinely hot days, one might call this the summer that wasn't. But isn't that even more reason to make the most of fall?

Things are picking up everywhere, and it's time to celebrate. Few readers will be surprised that this issue highlights the best new dining in the city—as it turns out, with an emphasis on River North and rock 'n' roll. (Our editor-in-chief, Korey Karnes Huyler, assures me this is a coincidence, not a secret theme I was never informed of.) Make sure to read associate editor Marissa Conrad's review of the new LaSalle Power Co. from our friends at Eat Well Drink Better—the impresarios behind such hotspots as English, Angels & Mariachis and Grand Central. Not only does LaSalle serve some of the best comfort food in town, but it's also a great live music venue, featuring the hottest local and national acts in a third-floor concert hall. It's a unique, fresh concept that underscores River North's status as the nightlife neighborhood to beat.

In the same vein, you won't want to miss our review on "It" spot Blue 13 from chef Chris Curren. Rarely have I seen our dining writer Michael Nagrant so enthused as he is about this rock-themed

destination. He swears by the scallops, pork belly, steak—just about everything.

One of the best aspects of living in Chicago is the huge array of activities it offers, and we have you covered on that front as well. For movie buffs, it's time for the 45th annual Chicago International Film Festival, featuring new films from Hollywood's best talent as well as dozens (actually 145) of independent and foreign movies never before seen in Chicago. Our two-page feature on the festival delivers the best insider information to help you plan your schedule.

Finally, as much as we're hometown fans, fall is also a wonderful time to head out and see the world. Did I forget to mention that this is our annual travel issue? Make sure to check out our features on dream vacations—and we mean dream vacations—to Hawaii's Kona island, Mexico's Isla Holbox and a Belizean resort created by none other than Francis Ford Coppola—as well as shorter pieces on an amazing Thai festival and two of the Caribbean's most urbane islands.

As for me? I think I'll stick around. This is one of the best summer cities in the world, but with everything going on it's starting to feel like fall is the new summer.  
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## My Blue Heaven

Tattoos meet truffle oil at this sassy River North emissary of amped-up American fare

| By Michael Nagrant | Photography by Dave Slivinski |

Blue 13 might be the only upscale restaurant in Chicago sporting a picture of a man weeping tears of blood. Pair that with black snakeskin patterned banquettes, framed Sailor Jerry tattoo graphics and a candlelit skull atop the bar, and you have a River North eatery where, at first glance, you may feel out of place sans late '70s studded dog collar and tight black jeans.

But at Blue, the rock 'n' roll vibe that designer Tim Kitzrow has intended is juxtaposed with a surprising number of gray-hairs in button-down dress shirts, making my wife and I, and not my fiftysomething in-laws seated across the table, the outliers. In fact, this dining room, with its dark woods, exposed bricks, cushy seating, potted bamboo and dimmed mood lighting, is starting to look a lot more Crate and Barrel than CBGB. Though I doubt the folks at Crate and Barrel would blast a rock-heavy soundtrack from indie darlings like Silversun Pickups in their showrooms.

Enamored, I turn on a program on my iPhone

that can "listen" to a short snippet of music and return the name of the song. Unfortunately the hum of conversation is interfering with the software, so I hold my phone aloft like a drunken concertgoer flipping open a Zippo during a "Free Bird" solo to get it closer to the speakers.

Two minutes later, general manager/partner/occasional maitre'd Dan Marunowski slips me a piece of paper with the artist and name of the song (The Appleseed Cast—"Fishing the Sky"). That kind of rock-star move is the type of anticipatory service you'd expect to find at a Michelin three-star, not a neighborhood spot, no matter how high-reaching. I grin sheepishly. "Don't worry, man," he says. "People do that with their phones here all the time."

The daily changing playlist at Blue serves as a great background to relax and order a drink, and while my wife is bobbing her head to the beat, I sneak a swig of her VeeV Açai Spa Cooler. The cool notes on the muddled mint- and lime-infused drink, made with VeeV's clear açai berry liquor, make it taste like a shot

CONTINUED...

### Blue 13

RATING: ★★★★★

416 W. Ontario St.,  
312.787.1400

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: *Your Iggy Pop T-shirt and button-fly Levi 505s.*

WHAT TO ORDER: *Crispy pork belly, pan-seared scallops, "coffee and doughnuts."*

WHEN TO GO: *7PM for a chill dinner, or later any evening if you want it rockin'.*

WHAT TO KNOW: *Every Sunday, the restaurant offers a \$20 family-style dinner.*

WHO GOES: *River North loft dwellers and Loop professionals.*

WHAT IT COSTS: *Appetizers \$6-\$12; entrées \$18-\$28; desserts \$6.*

SWEET 13 Above, clockwise from left: Blue 13's dining room; tattoo graphics on the wall; Blue 13's mascot, C. Montgomery. Below: "Coffee and doughnuts" dessert of house-made cinnamon and sugar doughnuts, whipped cream and "drip" coffee.



...CONTINUED of Wrigley Doublemint and cooling spring rain. My own Sailor Jerry Manhattan is a touch cloying—though the vanilla notes are enhanced by the sweet vermouth as advertised, I think it needs a woody bourbon for balance. But while making cocktail recs, our server picks up where Marunowski's service left off, and guides my father-in-law to a nice, bright, citrus-spiked amaretto stone sour.

While Blue 13 could stand alone as a cool drinking hideout, sleeve-tattooed chef/partner Chris Curren ensures that this venue is a proper one-stop noshing shop of rocked-out contemporary American cuisine. Maybe it's his killer tat of a Kunisada-style samurai that brings Japanese inspiration to the pork belly appetizer, where fiery islands of spicy kimchi floating in a flashy ginger-lime broth are tempered by the silky fat of a hefty, crispy-skinned hunk of pork belly crowned with a crispy, briny oyster. In any case, I'm thankful our server brought a spoon with this plate. Though my mother-in-law snatches the last piece of belly from me, I still feel victorious scooping up the spoils of the remaining lip-smacking broth.

Curren's Steak and Eggs on Acid dish features sunny-side-up quail egg-topped filet slices, which, sporting a ruby red, medium rare center, are fanned over a bed of potato and onion pierogi girded by swooshes of wasabi and house-made steak sauce. I generally view steak as a restaurant cliché, but the comforting richness of the runny egg and the solid potato dumplings (one complaint: the dough could be a touch less heavy) cut by the sharp bite of wasabi make this an unavoidable treat.

I may be the critic, but tonight proves that father (in-law) does know best: His crispy pan-crusted scallops entrée is my favorite plate. Peppery watercress and zingy lemon vinaigrette mingle, lightening the accompanying creamy sweet corn- and Manchego cheese-stuffed ravioli (here, the dough is light and pliant) and complementing the sweetness of the scallop. With everyone craning to get a bite, the tangle of arms, hands and utensils hovering over his plate has our table looking like an impromptu game of Twister.

At this point, properly stuffed, we do the only sensible thing and order three more desserts. Blue runs sans pastry chef, so these confections are all, remarkably, Curren's work. The best, "coffee and doughnuts"—a smart and casual integration of the molecular gastronomy technique called spherification—features hot, cinnamon-spiced doughnuts and teardrop-shaped, gelatin-skinned coffee nibs sporting a liquid center.

I recently tried the spherification process to make blueberry "caviar" at home, and my results tasted like a SuperBall. I'll spare you the Ph.D. dissertation that



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our server nimbly gives us about the whole technique, and just say Curren coaxes out some serious flavor. His delightful "drips" burst in your mouth, releasing a bracingly pure coffee flavor that ensures you'll skip the standard, suddenly boring, post-dinner cappuccino.

After years of reviewing, very few spots, even the five-star places, have cooked every single protein spot on. Leaving here, I realize that Blue 13 has delivered eight plates of meat, fish and vegetables at perfect temperature and, when appropriate, seared with a machine-precise crispy crust. That's not to say that every flavor or accoutrement was perfect—red curry sauce with halibut could have used less curry and more salt; though the spicy consommé served with the crab and corn spring roll was as slurpworthy as the pork belly kimchi broth, the flavor of the crab in the roll was dull. But I rarely see cooking consistency of this caliber, proving that chef Curren, a relative unknown who's spent most of his time in the garage band phase of chefdom, is ready to rock the arena-sized crowds who should be flocking to Blue 13. ■



Top: Pan-seared scallops with sweet corn and Manchego ravioli, watercress salad, spicy corn sauce and lemon vinaigrette. Above: A street view of Blue 13.