



CAFÉ DES ARCHITECTES

RATING: ★★★★★

20 E. Chestnut St.,
312.324.4063

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: *Complement the room's architecture with your sharpest mod print A-line skirt or the black suit and white shirt with an optional side of skinny tie.*

WHAT TO ORDER: *Five-hour braised short rib, diver scallops in brown butter, strawberry floating island.*

WHEN TO GO: *If you like a crowd, hotel-guest-filled weeknights are rockin'.*

WHAT TO KNOW: *The \$21.95 four-course, 30-minute executive lunch special is one of the best values in town.*

WHO GOES: *Conventioners, Euro-tourists and sharp Gold Coasters.*

WHAT IT COSTS: *Appetizers \$10-\$18; entrées \$25-\$38; desserts \$10.*

CAFÉ CULTURE *Clockwise from top left: The dining room at Café des Architectes; liquor bottles over the bar; Madagascar shrimp with grilled octopus, honey caramel sauce and Meyer lemon. Below: Strawberry rhubarb floating island with steamed meringue, rhubarb orange compote and strawberry crème anglaise.*



French Kiss

Vive la France! Chef Martial Noguier brings Parisian flair to the Sofitel Chicago

| By Michael Nagrant | Photography by Dave Slivinski |

I'm in Café des Architectes, which boasts one of the sharpest dining rooms in Chicago, and the greasy-haired guy in the gabardine blazer at the table next to me is holding forth on the subject of—what else?—Eastern European prostitutes. I try to ignore him, but with the tight arrangement of tables against the lush serpentine banquette that runs along the edge of this modern French restaurant, I can even smell the citrus musk of his cologne. Like a liquored-up Tony Soprano at the Bada Bing club, he tells his dining companion he once hung out with Vin Diesel, who's "not even that ripped."

I turn to my own dining companion and continue our conversation, hoping this guy finishes his plate and leaves. Though, the truth is, even if your table neighbors at the

Sofitel's Café des Architectes turn out to be polite guests (as is the case with just about every other diner here), you still have to get used to distraction. The modernist dining room—featuring gleaming chrome shutters, plush clean-lined seating and a soaring atrium window that opens out to the glitzy glow of the Rush and Wabash triangle—is mesmerizing eye candy. Stark but sharp French floral arrangements double as room-dividing architectural elements. Across the lobby, the sleek backlit chronograph inlaid in the hotel's bar (Le Bar) reminds me of the iconic window clocks in Paris' Musée d'Orsay.

The showy dining room is an amusing foil to CDA's surprisingly low-profile top toque, Martial Noguier. Imagine if Brad Pitt still looked like the CONTINUED...

...CONTINUED Adonis we adore, but went through life not as a paparazzi-baiting headliner, but with the notoriety of his *Ocean's Eleven* co-star Don Cheadle. Now you have an idea of Noguier's predicament. He's apprenticed at the best restaurants in the world with Alain Ducasse and Joachim Splichal; he's nimbly helmed one sixtyblue, the Michael Jordan-partnered contemporary American restaurant in the West Loop, for the last seven years. But outside of serious foodie circles, few people know who he is.

After a couple of trips to CDA, I think I know why. Like Tiger Woods sinking a long putt to force an overtime play-off in a golf major, Noguier makes something difficult—cooking an almost seamless meal—seem effortless. You hardly have to pay attention.

On this visit, a five-hour braised short rib is lacquered with a star anise-perfumed veal stock that glints through the prism of a carrot foam bubble kaleidoscope. The sweetness of the carrot and the spice of the star anise cut through the rich beefiness of the rib. Even better is a *Poseidon Adventure*-worthy tender purple baby octopus tentacle draped over succulent Madagascar shrimp and coddled in a honey caramel sauce. Citrus fireworks of Meyer lemon pulp balance the sweetness of the sauce and the salt in the seafood for a perfect bite.

Waiters are a bit quick to remove a glass of semi-dry fruity Sparr Riesling (one of the few choices on the wine list that's not classic French) with a couple of swigs left in the bowl, and to grab the remainder of my unfinished short rib. But, then again, who cares? The hurry salves my anxious anticipation for the next course.

Though our *pommes dauphine* is served with slightly overcooked filet mignon—we asked for medium-rare and receive medium-well—the golden deep-fried potato croquettes, which shoot forth truffle-perfumed steam when we crack them open, are incredibly addictive. I may have to join Jenny Craig to negate the calorie overload here, but the savory treats are more than worth it.

I'm hesitant to order scallops, which on paper sound dull. But when they hit the table, the fork-tender mollusks happily overdeliver, dripping in brown butter and girded with Frenched chicken wing lollipops. The dish explodes with such a delightful sweet and spicy glaze that it'll be hard for me to ever dial for take-out wings again.

Maybe even more obscure than Noguier, and unfairly so, is his pastry chef, Suzanne Imaz. Her



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floating island dessert, a cloud of meringue hovering over strawberry crème anglaise, would be straight out of the Escoffier playbook, if not for the secret rhubarb raft hidden under the meringue that surprises with its complementary tartness.

Her chocolate pistachio dome has a mirrored sheen that rivals the hood of a well-buffed '57 Chevy. Coupled with the long, wispy chocolate shaving mounted on top, it looks like Mercury's winged helmet—which is only appropriate, as once you spoon the lush chocolate mousse and sweet pistachio cream onto your tongue, your blood quickens.

The truism is that if you work hard enough or smart enough, people will laud you. I think Noguier, no matter how quiet of a persona he keeps, is about to have his day. Instead of obsessing over every ingredient and deconstructing aspects of a meal like I usually do, I find myself eating with such abandon, I forget about the tough guy who initially interrupted my meal. Anyway, he left before I could consider whether he was some mobbed-up Russian oligarch. I'm going to say no, because during the meal I'd dropped a butter knife smeared with Café des Architectes' green-olive tapenade near his mahogany leather wing tip, and he didn't have me whacked. Of course, maybe he's a discrete gangster, and the shoe will drop later. If it does, at least I'm well-fed. ■



Chef Martial Noguier's seared scallops. Above: The dining room overlooks the Rush and Wabash triangle.