



## Epic

RATING: ★★★

112 W. Hubbard St.,  
312.222.4940

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.

# Bringing Sexy Back

Industrial-chic Epic is a triple threat: Flashy, flirty and focused on top-notch food

| By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier |

When evaluating a restaurant, I often consider the booty factor. The more elements of a restaurant that suggest the place is a meat market geared to finding a potential booty call, the more likely it won't serve good food.

By that measure, things didn't bode well for Epic, a high-styling, industrial-inspired, new American restaurant in River North. For one, it's located in Red Bull row—a beer can's throw away from vodka and energy drink-fueled pick-up joints like NV Penthouse Lounge, Rokit Bar & Grill and Social Twenty-Five.

I'm later proved wrong—Epic has a chef-driven menu with few slipups and many grand slams, including one of the best steaks in the city. But let me start from the beginning. To ride up to Epic's rooftop lounge, we're directed into an elevator lit by dim red bulb. By the time

we reach the third-floor roof, I'm humming the chorus of The Police's "Roxanne" in my head. The rooftop is populated by a bevy of beautiful people and cocktail waitresses who have an astounding mastery of micro-minis, but perhaps not as much of drinks. When my pregnant wife asks for a virgin cocktail, our waitress suggests a Shirley Temple. After we ask if the bartender could improvise something else (maybe something a little more sophisticated and less appropriate for our three-year-old son), she returns with a juice blend, but doesn't say what's in it. It's also served in a plastic tumbler. I've been on many rooftops where there are rules about glass, and high spaces, and disasters-by-wind. Unfortunately, it still feels a

MEAT MARKET? Epic's first-floor lounge; gnocchi with lamb sausage, swiss chard and fennel beurre blanc.

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WHAT TO WEAR: *Chalk-striped blazers with designer jeans for the gents. Summer dresses for the ladies, especially on the hot roof.*

WHAT TO ORDER: *Veal sweetbreads, gnocchi with lamb sausage, smoked rib eye.*

WHEN TO GO: *Thursday night, when the crowd is buzzing, but not overwhelming.*

WHAT TO KNOW: *Though you get one of the many house-made dipping sauces free with your grilled meat order, get an extra one on the side for the \$3 upcharge. It's worth it.*

WHO GOES: *Expense accounters and young socialites.*

WHAT IT COSTS: *Appetizers \$9-\$18; entrées \$23-\$43; desserts \$8-\$10.*





*Clockwise from far left: Epic chef Stephen Wambach; fresh English peas with chopped mint and bacon lardons; house-made French fries; the second-floor dining room.*

My drink is served in a plastic tumbler. But, here's the thing. Epic's berry-infused Kentucky Smash and its smoky Paloma would be delightful in Styrofoam, or a 40-ounce glass bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag.

...CONTINUED little like a college grad's first Wrigleyville pad with CB2 drinkware.

But, here's the thing. Epic's bourbon- and berry-infused Kentucky Smash and its grapefruit-perfumed, smoky Paloma would be delightful in Styrofoam, or a 40-ounce glass bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag. Add in the free bowls of rosemary-seasoned popcorn, the white linen lounge chairs, the stunning skyscraper views—including a peek of the sleek Trump Tower turret—and now we're talkin'.

As our party makes its way down to the second floor, my confidence wanes. Looming exposed brick walls tower over a split-level dining area filled with hundreds of dark wood chairs trimmed with white leather. There's no way you can put out great food for this many people. Just ask anyone who's served in the military.

But, Epic chef Stephen Wambach is not just anyone. He's a vet of New

York City chef Laurent Tourondel's BLT restaurant group; a guy who knows how to serve great food to the masses.

To start, my friends and I throw back crispy sweetbread nuggets like popcorn shrimp. I'd say we were tossing them back like French fries, but we have those too—crisp, mahogany planks on par with Belgian frites of the finest order, and served in a tiny fryer basket that makes you wonder if there are Smurf-sized deep fryers in the kitchen.

Epic's smoked bone-in rib eye, a Flintstones-sized hunk of medium-rare meat pinker than a Hello Kitty store and crowned by a well-seared top crust, is one of the best steaks I've had in Chicago, next to the dry-aged rib eye at David Burke's and pretty much anything at Nine. The smoke comes from smoked sea salt, a subtle touch.

Pausing between courses, I'm enchanted by the towering plate glass windows that afford an even better view than the rooftop. Sunk down a little lower among the skyscrapers, you feel like you're engulfed in the cradling belly of the city. Almost as entertaining is watching men exit the adult video store across the street, slinking away to their shiny BMWs.

While I devour the view, we chow on simple, crisp English peas bursting with a wintergreen fireworks

of chopped mint and salty explosions of tiny bacon lardons. It's been a while since I've had a progression of savory courses this well executed. In full disclosure, though I used a pseudonym to make my reservation, I was recognized by Epic's manager, whom I met when he used to work at a different restaurant. I wonder if this is having an impact on my meal.

It's tough to say, for nothing is as enticing as Epic's gnocchi: seared pillows of potato which have just a whisper of, if any, binding flour. They melt like silky mashed potatoes. Restaurants make gnocchi ahead of time, and thus (except for not overcooking), the genius of this dish has nothing to do with me being recognized.

Not everything's perfect. Our server is very attentive, but she forgets a glass of Sauvignon Blanc for one of my friends. In contrast, though, a different server patiently talks a woman through the wine list and comps her a glass when she doesn't like her first.

Pastry chef Christine McCabe left the restaurant shortly before press time, so I won't comment on dessert. But I will say: Even if the discovery of my visit has colored the experience, there's no question that Epic's team has real chops, especially with chops like that rib eye. Sure, it's a meat market ... but the kind I can definitely get behind. ■