



Rhapsody in Blue

Trotter alum Michael McDonald brings a taste explosion to the West Loop's one sixtyblue

| By Michael Nagrant | Photography by Dave Slivinski |

With Michael Jordan as a silent partner in the West Loop's one sixtyblue, it's tempting to dub the restaurant's new chef, Michael McDonald, the culinary Scottie Pippen. After all, McDonald's arrival comes after a long stint as the right hand man of the Jordan of cuisine, Charlie Trotter, running both Trotter's C restaurant in Los Cabos and Restaurant Charlie in Vegas. But after dining at one sixty, I reconsider. Pippen, as great as he was, could never win without Jordan. McDonald sans Trotter? *That's* a game to watch.

Unfortunately, you wouldn't know it by the crowd. On a Saturday night, amidst the French vanilla-shaded light fixtures and black, towering timber columns, the half empty dining room looks more like the audience for a weeknight game between two last-place teams. I'm flanked on both sides by the entire spectrum of the Match.com crowd. On my left, a canoodling couple treats a banquette as if it is the backseat of a '68 Mustang, while on my right a more timid first date pairing, clothed head

to toe in beatnik black, warily eyes a shooter of cranberry tapioca pearls.

It would be easy to blame the weather—it's subzero and blizzarding—for the turnout, but, on my way to the restaurant, I'd driven by a Brazilian steakhouse only to see 10 times as many people out in the swirling snow, waiting for the right to eat meat off a stick served by faux-mustachioed gauchos. Tired décor isn't keeping people away either. One sixtyblue is like the Scott Baio of restaurants—it never seems to age. Adam Tihany's Art Deco-inflected, *Mad Men*-meets-modern design looks as good as it did when the spot opened 10 years ago.

And I certainly can't blame the emptiness on the food. As Trotter continues to focus on extravagantly priced, French-kissed global fusion, his bench of line cooks has taken those moves to other teams. But few, outside of Graham Elliot Bowles (Graham Elliot), with his whimsy, and Homaro Cantu (Moto), with his lasers and edible paper—and now, McDonald—have innovated

ONE SIXTYBLUE

RATING: ★★★★★

1400 W. Randolph St.,
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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, ambience and service.

WHAT TO WEAR: *Chalk-stripe blazer and designer jeans for the gents; cashmere wrap dress and sharp heels for the ladies.*

WHAT TO ORDER: *Roast pumpkin soup, Wagyu short rib, sticky toffee date cake.*

WHEN TO GO: *Judging by the sparse dining room on a Saturday night, whenever you want.*

WHAT TO KNOW: *Get the \$8 hefty seared lobe of foie gras add-on with the hash browns. You won't find this much duck liver priced lower at retail.*

WHO GOES: *First-daters looking to impress and West Loop neighborhood foodies.*

WHAT IT COSTS: *Appetizers \$8-\$14; entrées \$19-\$35; desserts \$8.*

SHADES OF BLUE *Clockwise from top left: The glass-encased wine wall in one sixtyblue's dining room; the main dining room; chef Michael McDonald. Below: Two-bone rack of grilled lamb with a medallion of braised lamb on a purée of roasted carrots, served with Harissa couscous, caramelized Thumbelina carrots, lamb jus and red curry emulsion.*



or aped the master well enough to take things to the next level. What makes McDonald's food so compelling is that it combines Trotteresque classic fusion, Bowles' tongue-in-cheek pop cultural nods and accessible nibbles of Cantu's techno-inflected performance art.

When a food runner drops off a bread basket featuring cracker-style oregano-spiced flatbread and tangy "pickle" butter, the dill and garlic perfume from the butter alone has me forever swearing off the insipid, commercial Vlasic spears of my youth.

In fact, I find myself swearing off old food habits all night. One bite of McDonald's hash browns (available as a side order or with the citrus-cured salmon), which are topped with golden coils of caramelized shallot and dusted with duck fat powder, and I realize I've idealized the relatively limp and unseasoned spuds served at weekend brunches far too much. Though I'm sharing a table with my lovely wife and some close friends, I'm not letting the joy of great company cloud my judgment: These hash browns are that good. If anyone asks, I may be persuaded to trade a dining companion for a regular supply of the rich, ducky goods. Of course, that's also because I realize my table has stopped contributing to the conversation. Like the rest of the hushed room, they are spoon deep in their plates, noshing with delighted abandon and no sound but a sated sigh or two.

Just as comforting as fried potatoes, the custardy pumpkin soup, topped with a nutmeg-spiced "egg nog" cloud of foam, is what I imagine would happen if a *crème brûlée* made love to a pumpkin pie. Though there is a tiny piece of chewy connective tissue mixed in with the luscious pheasant confit garnish, it is a minor annoyance, like Jordan's temporary baseball career with the White Sox, that can't mar an otherwise champion dish. And tonight, while icy shards gather on the plate-glass restaurant windows, this bowl is the perfect internal space heater.

Speaking of Jordan, until recently there was always a Delmonico steak dish with balsamic ginger broth on the one sixtyblue menu, reportedly because it was his Airness's favorite. These days it's gone, but my guess is that's because Jordan—and almost anyone else—would find a new entrée of tender, Fred Flintstone-sized hunks of short rib swimming in creamy grits and fresh horseradish and topped with a soulfully rich, crunchy, marrow-infused crouton to be a slam dunk replacement.

After I sigh my way through savory goods, Stephanie Prida, McDonald's pastry chef, whacks me over the head with a jolting but refreshing tart-meets-sweet, three-layer shot of cranberry-soaked tapioca pearls, spiced cider and Granny Smith apple sorbet. And she too makes sure I won't freeze in the arctic tundra of Chicago, serving a warm, sticky toffee-date cake so gooey that orthodontists everywhere are rooting against it. Our waiter assures us this is one of his favorite desserts, but unlike most restaurants—where you know the service staff is sychophantically currying a big tip—there is a real measure of sincerity in his voice. Like almost everyone who has graced our table, he seems like a real stakeholder in the business rather than a hired gun.

Upon further review, if McDonald is comparable to any NBA player, he's more like Tim Duncan of the San

Antonio Spurs, who cast off the shadow of the equally talented and vaunted David Robinson to lead a few of his own solo NBA championship-winning efforts. When you can get Trotter-quality food and service (this is one of the first times I've had a food runner who knows as much about molecular gastronomy techniques and our Brundlmayer Gruner Veltliner wine as the chef and sommelier), not to mention fabulous *mignardise*, including wrapped pumpkin bread, for next day's breakfast, all while making your own choices about what you eat (at Trotter's, a chef-chosen tasting menu is *de rigueur*), one sixtyblue makes you wonder if Charlie is even relevant—or desirable—any more.

McDonald has only been at one sixtyblue for a few months, and I know that as people discover the new leadership, the crowds will come. As a testament to this, toward the end of my meal, I notice a bleach-blonde, Jerry Hall look-alike sporting a fox fur stole and a man wearing a red-and-green plaid, Burberry-style jacket commandeer a corner table. These are the kind of folks who, five or 10 years ago, would be spending a night like this at Trotter's. ■

From top: A table in one of one sixtyblue's private dining rooms; house-cured salmon with crispy potato and lemon curd.



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