



Henri

RATING: ★★★

18 S. Michigan Ave.,
312.578.0763

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: Pearls and a smart black dress for the ladies; suit, no tie, for the gents.

WHAT TO ORDER: Wellington of lobster and foie gras, rabbit with house-made bacon (Thursdays only), mille feuille.

WHEN TO GO: On payday.

WHAT TO KNOW: Erik Nelson, former GM of The Drawing Room, is an incredible server.

WHO GOES: You know the ladies who lunch? This is where they go to dinner, alongside Loop executives and their clients.

WHEN IT'S OPEN: Mon.-Fri. 11AM-11PM; Sat.-Sun. 5PM-11PM.

WHAT IT COSTS: Appetizers \$9-\$22; entrées \$15-\$38; desserts \$8.

FRENCH CONNECTION Clockwise from top left: Henri's dining room, inspired by architect Louis Henri Sullivan; Champagne cocktails with rock sugar, house-made bitters and strawberries; elegant table settings. Below: The prime burger, bold with tomato jam, Sartori reserve and a layer of short rib.



Game Changer

The owners of The Gage revive fine dining with a restaurant that leaves gastropubs in the dust

| By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier |

Well, my first idea was to open a go-go bar, kids restaurateur Billy Lawless, letting out a hearty guffaw. That's the response, delivered with a boyish grin and lilting Irish brogue, that the longtime Chicagoan—who's wearing an orange Psycho Bunny tie with his slick pressed suit—gives me when I ask him how he came up with the idea for his new French-American fine dining spot, Henri. (It's a Thursday night and he's walking around Henri's packed dining room, stopping by all the tables to chat.)

There's no doubt that he's joking, but considering that Lawless is behind some of Chicago's homiest pubs (The Grafton, Irish Oak, The Gage), the staid confines of his new project on Michigan Avenue is quite a departure... especially for a guy who, with his closely cropped haircut and barrel chest, looks like he could destroy a man on the rugby pitch.

And that's a good thing. I was always on the fence about Lawless' flagship next door, The Gage. I love the bar as a place to clink a few pints with my mates (because that's what we call each other after a few rounds

of Guinness), but I always have a tough time with the back dining room. You have liquor-sopping bar eats like poutine mingling with \$17 fish and chips, and flickering candles lighting the way to tourists whooping it up over a soccer game at the front bar. I can never tell if I'm at a nice restaurant or an overpriced Bannigan's.

Henri has no such identity crisis. It is a serious 180 from the casual gastropub movement that Lawless started with The Gage. (To echo his sentiments, why create competition next door to yourself?) With its velvet-lined walls, crystal chandeliers wrapped in amber shades and crown-molded ceilings, Henri really could have been designed by its namesake, late-nineteenth-century architect and local hero Louis Henri Sullivan.

Leather bar chairs trimmed with silver studs are manly housings, fitting for the cigar-chomping Chicago machine bosses of days past. The plush, tufted, seafoam-green wingbacks in the dining room would suit a cotillion of French noblewomen. Spiky white Chinese chrysanthemums peek out of silvery bud vases. Waiters in fitted vests and ties, with CONTINUED...



The plush wingbacks would suit a cotillion of French noblewomen. Waiters with slicked locks pour magnificent reds from magnums. Forget breakfast at Tiffany's—Audrey Hepburn would surely have had dinner at Henri.



From top: Flash-smoked steak tartare with a runny quail egg; a salad of tatsoi, croutons, bacon and robiola.

...CONTINUED perfectly coiffed slicked back locks, pour magnificent reds from magnum bottles. They look like an army of German schoolboys from the 1940s. Forget breakfast at Tiffany's—Audrey Hepburn would surely have had dinner at Henri.

This buttoned-up identity sometimes works too well, attracting a fussy lot. The old professorial men next to me, mopping up the last of their early bird dinner, haven't said a word to each other in 20 minutes.

But, I'm tired of dishrag linens. I'm sick of drinking watery, soapy tasting cocktails from the so-called mixologists at your average gastropub. I've eaten enough middling organ meat and too-crispy pork belly that I've likely earned a one-way ticket to an aortic stent. I'll gladly put up with idiosyncratic diners if it means I get a little luxury along the way.

Consider Henri's Wellington: a coin of foie gras, hunks of lobster and tufts of spinach wrapped in a puff pastry shell and dipped in bright sherry gastrique. It's a Hot Pocket for the Gold Coast set. With the buttery, gamey juices of the duck liver melting over the

tender lobster and mixing with the salty, earthy punch of spinach, it's also damn tasty, though admittedly furthering my need for that stent.

The Wellington is emblematic of executive chef Dirk Flanigan's commitment to serving up old-world dishes with a modern kick. So is the steak tartare I order, rich with a haunting perfume from a "smoking gun," a futuristic gadget that fans food with a quick burst of cool smoke. The tender raw beef, coated in the yolk of a breached quail egg, is served on a crispy raft of house-fried, gossamer-light potato chips.

Even pizza gets a fancy name, *pisaldière*, at Henri. Call it what you want, but the puffy, golden flatbread layered with translucent slivers of Lyon artichoke and dripping raclette cheese is as good cold the next morning as it is hot from the kitchen.

Sommelier Shebne Ince takes a cue from Flanigan, offering many old-school varietals, but with a twist: a list focused on biodynamic (the wine world's version of organic) wine producers. The table of businessmen on my right seems to love this approach, slurping down glass after glass of a tobacco- and cherry-flavored Vieux Telegraph Chateaufort du Pape, poured from a magnum. Unfortunately, all that vino has led to a little too much veritas, and they're now swapping war stories about passing kidney stones.

I can tune them out over Ince's coolest innovation, a selection of cocktails that mix liquor with either wine or a grape-based spirit such as Pineau des Charentes, a blend of grape must and Cognac eau-de-vie. My favorite, the Henri Presse featuring the Pineau des Charentes, Old Overholt rye, Cointreau and lemon, drinks like a mash-up of a lemon drop, a whiskey smash and a jar of Smucker's Concord grape.

Ince has trained her staff well. When I order the Thursday night rabbit special, our waiter offers up a glass of jammy Quivira Grenache that, at a retail price of less than \$25 a bottle, quickly turns into one of my favorite wines of the year.

Henri would be four stars, if not for some inconsistency that came with the entrées. The rabbit is wrapped in a killer bacon with a pliant chew that yields little puffs of smoke with each bite. But the bunny meat itself is a little dry. House-made pappardelle is a touch gummy and the English peas tossed in it are chalky. The lobster on top is well cooked, but it's served in the tail shell along with the head, whose sandy, inedible antennae bits find their way into the pasta. At \$38, it's also a bit overpriced, considering the drop in lobster prices over the last few years.

I find redemption in dessert. With sweets topping out at \$12 at some local spots these days, the \$8 mille feuille, featuring flaky pastry with a touch of salt, silky crème, plenty of fresh local berries and a crispy sugar glaze top, is a napoleon fit for Napoleon himself.

I think in a few years, when restaurant historians look back at the rebirth of fine dining in Chicago, Henri will represent ground zero. Lawless, who will by then have started two revolutions, clearly has his pulse on the future of restaurants. As such, don't be surprised if a bevy of go-go dining halls start popping up everywhere. ■