



Clockwise from left: Theory's lobster nachos; the main dining room; an Appletini; fresh crabmeat dip with roasted orange peppers and baby spinach served with house-made tortilla, potato and toasted pita chips.



OH, BABY House-smoked baby back ribs wrapped in maple bacon and rubbed with brown sugar.

## Theory

9 W. Hubbard St.,  
312.644.0004.

HOURS: Mon.-Fri. 11AM-2AM;  
Sat. 11AM-3AM;  
Sun. 10AM-midnight.

### THE DEAL MAKERS

*Brown sugar-rubbed, maple bacon-wrapped and cherry applewood-smoked baby back ribs served with house or Carolina barbecue sauce, \$7 for 3 or \$15 for 7*

*Carne asada of marinated skirt steak on a toasted jalapeño roll topped with pico de gallo, sour cream, guacamole and salsa verde, \$14*

*Sweet Carolina tea-infused vodka and lemonade served over ice with a lemon slice, \$7*

# Disproven Theory

River North's newest sports lounge opens Chicago's eyes to gourmet game-day cuisine

| By Michael Nagrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier |

There are “sports bar” people, and there are “not sports bar” people. I am not a sports bar person. Sure, I get goose bumps thinking of the White Sox 2005 championship run; of Juan Uribe tumbling head over heels into the stands to make the second-to-last out in the series. But sports bars are generally hook-up spots masquerading as entertainment venues, usually with some type of booty music obscuring the announcer's call. Worse, they are generally larders of stale pretzels and desiccated hot wings. As such, on the cab ride to Theory, a new sports lounge in River North, with the Sox game I intended to watch rained out, I pull out my iPhone and scan nearby restaurant listings to see where I might get a real meal after my review.

Theory, however, doesn't look like the frat-tastic Wrigley watering hole I'm expecting. There's no Miller Lite perfume wafting through the air, and no heavy-breathing dudes sporting jiggly bellies cinched in by vintage Ryné Sandberg jerseys. There are more flat-screen televisions than in a Best Buy show room, but they're mounted in loft-like brick and timber settings, outfitted with gleaming granite and complemented by plush, micro-suede seating. The men here are generally accompanied by girlfriends, and if they're not, the surprising number of attractive women-only parties means there's a good chance to meet one.

Tonight, a few of these women—enrapt in the Washington Capitals/Pittsburgh Penguins NHL playoff game—question my manhood with a wary glance when I order the Theory Domicile house salad (perfectly seasoned and dressed with tangy light ranch). I earn back some cred by gnawing through a set of wings, whose moist flesh and sweet heat (from ghost chile and apple cider vinegar) ensure that, as the menu claims, they are “better than buffalo.” Next up, the sweet, crunchy, brown sugar- and maple bacon-lacquered crust on Brian's

Besmoked baby back ribs gives way to tender flesh tinged with a pink smoke ring, a telltale sign that these smoke shack-worthy bones were slow-smoked and not baked in an oven. (I later learn that all smoked cheeses and meats on the menu are done in-house.)

The spicy and salty eats have me grabbing for a John Daly, a sweet-tea-infused vodka and lemonade cocktail. This refreshing twist on the half lemonade/half iced tea Arnold Palmer is so deceptively boozy, I quickly switch to beer, lest I find myself passing out in the bar like the cocktail's namesake is apt to do. With local smooth lager Half Acre and hoppy Belgian pale ale Delirium Tremens on tap, the suds list, while not particularly long, is solid.

Inevitably, even with good bar food, you usually find yourself at the end of such a liquor-soaked night crawling up to the local taquería for stomach-settling eats. The great thing about Theory is that it's a one-stop shop. The Taco a Trois platter, featuring succulent, caramelized chunks of carne asada and sweet peppers nestled in warm corn tortillas, is better than anything you'd find at La Pasadita. The accompanying creamy tomatillo and jalapeño salsa verde is even Frontera Grill worthy. After a few bites, I put the iPhone away for good, and start to wonder if maybe I am a sports bar person after all. ■