



MEAT & EAT Clockwise from left: The Publican dining room; braised pork potée; Dungeness crab boil.



Parsing the Publican

Paul Kahan and company score another huge hit with a hip beer hall

| By Michael NAGRANT | Photography by Anthony Tablier and Grant Kessler |

Generally, I don't put much stock in décor. Serve me a great tasting plate and you can seat me in a stable. But sitting under the brass-trimmed globe lamps at the Publican (the new meat packing district spot birthed by proud Blackbird/Avec father Paul Kahan and business partners Donnie Madia, Eduard Seitan and Terry Alexander), shrouded by a hazy glow that makes me feel like I'm squinting, I'm starting to think that scenery matters after all.

The showpiece of the cavernous dining room is a wooden, dragstrip-style communal table that conjures visions of bearded men sloshing pewter flagons of mead. Underneath is a rough stone floor just screaming for a dusting of straw. If a squad of Vikings dropped in to Chicago looking for debauchery, I'd send them here. I, on the other hand, don't have an ounce of Norse blood, and this impersonal hall is making me crave the intimacy of the Publican team's other interiors, like the honey-wooded womb at Avec. Not to mention that getting scrutinized by a sea of mod-rimmed hipsters and Zegna-suited professionals jostling for the next free seat is kind of stressing me out.

Fortunately, once I grab the bill of fare—excuse me, the menu—in the main hall, I stop paying attention to my surroundings. Most restaurants these days follow an iTunes-like model, scoring with a few hit dishes while girding the rest of their selection with filler. But reading chef de cuisine Brian Huston's menu is like listening to The Beatles' *White Album* or The Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds*. The selection is challenging and gutsy, and there's not a throwaway dish on it.

For the record, I know most eaters don't share my enthusiasm for organ meat. That's why I brought along my in-laws. Their idea of a good meal is thick, grilled steak and a shot of Baileys in their coffee. It's when I see my father-in-law dive in to a duck egg and tripe (a.k.a. stomach tissue) gratin like it's spaghetti Bolognese and my mother-in-law inhale deep fried sweetbreads (a.k.a. thymus glands) that I'm really sure the Publican is on to something. The gratin, woven with ribbons of earthy Tuscan kale and honeycomb tripe (so delicately cooked it's more like a noodle), is tossed in a tangy tomato sauce and encrusted in

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THE PUBLICAN

RATING: ★★★★★

837 W. Fulton Market,
312.733.9555

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: Baggy clothes and a portable defibrillator in case all the pork blocks an artery. Seriously, though, no fancy attire required.

WHAT TO ORDER: Nichols Farm heirloom apple salad, wood oven-roasted sardines, duck egg and tripe gratin, cider-glazed donuts.

WHEN TO GO: Early in the week, and weekends before 7, after which time you risk a concert trampling tragedy from the masses waiting for a table.

WHAT TO KNOW: The Publican serves oysters, drinks and select appetizers starting at 3:30PM. If you time it right, by the time your apps are done, you'll have a seat when they start serving the full menu at 5:30.

WHO GOES: Paul Kahan, Blackbird and Avec groupies, professionals who read about it in a food gossip column and serious foodies.

WHAT IT COSTS: Appetizers \$2-14; entrees \$10-35; desserts \$7.

The Lane pork shank.



"We rip through the accompanying frites—fried in a combo of pork lard and beef suet—like ravenous tots at a McDonald's birthday party."

...CONTINUED a dome of crispy parmesan, making for a series of perfect bites. The sweetbreads are pounded thin, coated in a blanket of breadcrumbs and deep fried schnitzel style. Clearly the Germans have been getting it wrong all these years, as the melty offal interior is superior to the tougher shards of veal flesh often used.

Not everything on the menu is a mystery meat. Deep-fried walleye nuggets are like sea-kissed Krispy Kremes and just as addictive. Boudin blanc, a crispy skinned housemade veal-and-chicken sausage garnished with smoky grapes and shaved black truffle, is perched on a nest of crispy hash browns that would make an accomplished diner cook weep.

All these fat-laden goodies have me worried that my in-laws might be headed to the emergency room with a monster case of gout or a coronary, so I try to temper things with a salad. But the crisp batons of heirloom apples, celery root and greens tossed in chili garlic vinaigrette are topped with crunchy bacon planks. While it's unfortunate for our blood pressures, the sweet, spicy and salty mix is my favorite use of the pig here.

The only real disappointment, even for my red meat-loving dining companions, is a Wagyu beef tartare, chopped too coarsely and short on tangy, richness-cutting cornichons. Then again, we rip through the accompanying frites—fried in a combo of pork lard and beef suet—like ravenous tots at a McDonald's birthday party.

Thirsty from the salt, we turn adult again with the Publican's beer list, which is one of the finest I've seen in Chicago. Many of the craft brews that you can find at any good, local beer bar tend to run \$1 or \$2 more a glass here, though, so I'd stick to the rarer offerings if you're looking for value. The wine list also is impressive and affordable, with several bottles priced under \$30. We all opt for beer, though. The Deus Brut des Flandres, a bubbly, creamy Belgian suds fermented and produced the same way as



HALL PASS *From top:* Diners can eat at the bar in front of the kitchen; the smoked rushing water trout; chef de cuisine Brian Huston.

Champagne, might be the best offered here (or anywhere, really). Unfortunately, my server jostles the bottle and pops off the cork like a White Sox player uncapping bubbly after the 2005 World Series win, causing us to get more foam than beer in most of the pours.

Service is otherwise competent, but by no means inspiring. It's also slightly awkward, the long tables making for quite a lap when servers don't want to reach over one plate to set down another, and the tall ladder-back chairs making it difficult to serve discreetly in the first place. When my in-laws ask for their inevitable Baileys-infused coffee, the waitress says they don't carry it, and suggests rum instead. They agree, but the food runners bring out straight coffee. Eventually, the waitress returns with double shot glasses of whiskey, saying that the rum isn't good with coffee. While I'm amused watching my in-laws throwing liquor down their gullets (they've already finished their coffee) as if they were at a Northwestern kegger, it would have been nice if the waitress had confirmed the substitution. Busboys, intent on turning our table, work with the speed of an Indy 500 pit crew, occasionally removing a glass with a few last sips in it.

Desserts, however, from a soufflé-light waffle tossed with honey butter and strawberries to cinnamon-sprinkled cider donuts dipped in sour cream sorbet, are so brilliant that they're gone in 60 seconds. There's no need to worry about anyone lingering over sweets.

Full, and flanked by happy in-laws, I realize that neither the service nor the décor gets in the way of one of the most interesting and best-executed menus offered in Chicago. And since the Publican's kitchen is open late on weekends, I know if I'm looking for some good bites with my friends after a few cocktails or for some organ meats with the fam, I've found my new go-to spot—even if Chicago's Viking population catches wind. ■