



Ria

RATING: ★★★★★

11 E. Walton St., 312.880.4400

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: *Shiny blazers and Thomas Pink striped shirts for guys; Carmen Marc Valvo metallic tweed cocktail dresses for gals.*

WHAT TO ORDER: *Lobster with blood orange sabayon, Peking duck breast and foie gras, spiced hazelnut pain de gene.*

WHEN TO GO: *Friday nights if you want a lively, eclectic crowd.*

WHAT TO KNOW: *Forgo the valet prices and grab one of the ample metered spaces surrounding the hotel.*

WHO GOES: *Hotel guests and couples or families celebrating special occasions.*

WHAT IT COSTS: *Appetizers \$14-\$20; entrées \$32-\$40; desserts \$12.*

RIA GRANDE *Clockwise from top left: Ria's dining room; one of several abstract paintings throughout the restaurant and lounge; Peking duck breast with pistachio-crust foie gras. Below: Almond baba cake.*



Haute to Trot

At Ria, chef Jason McLeod pairs old-world luxury with a refreshing spin on four-star service—including a sommelier with a sense of humor | *By Michael Nagrant | Photography by Dave Slivinski* |

The swank Elysian Hotel in the Gold Coast is so hip that it named its new upscale restaurant, Ria, after an earth science term. For those focused on more pressing matters during middle school science class, like how to score a ride to the mall, a “ria” is a submergent coastal landform often known as a drowned river valley. Holy snoozorama!

I rarely investigate restaurants before I dine out. But, nonplussed by Ria’s name (which turns out to be a nod to chef Jason McLeod’s land-meets-sea philosophy), I had to know more. The more I read, the worse it seemed. Prior to this gig, McLeod had spent several years cooking at dusty resorts and snooty hotels. Ria was offering \$40 entrées during a recession. They served dainty amuse-bouche and mignardise and indulged in old-school schemes like wheeling a block of cheese to your table before dessert to pressure you into buying a cheese course. The only thing they seemed to be missing from the tired red wine, steak and potato formula of classic hotel dining was a judgmental tuxedoed maître d’. For all I knew, maybe they had one.

I was totally wrong. Not just about the maître d’, but about everything. To borrow another earth science term, Ria is an oasis—of unpretentious fine dining. It could be the restaurant love child of L2O and Blackbird.

McLeod’s locally and seasonally focused flavors remind me of Paul Kahan’s earliest years. Yet he cooks with Michelin-starred precision, and Ria spares no luxury or service detail. Neither does the hotel, which sports a cobblestone courtyard riddled with Porsches and BMWs. Tonight, three doormen stand sentry, handing umbrellas to folks as they make their way into the foggy, rain-squall-filled night.

A pair of enormous hollow-eyed busts that look like they were robbed from the Parthenon guard the lobby, their grandeur enhanced by a sleek crystal-burst chandelier that seems like a sculptural interpretation of a dandelion gone to poofy seed. (It’s actually modeled on a brooch Coco Chanel used to wear). As we contemplate the lobby, a front desk clerk shuffles us off to an elevator, presses a button, and the silver box whisks us to the restaurant lobby above on floor three.

That’s pretty much where the fuss ends. The charming maître d’ turns out not to have a monocle; instead she sports an upswept do and a sharp, black, plunging cowl-necked dress. She leads us through a shimmering lounge filled with carefree cocktail swillers into a dining room outfitted with microfiber sofas, deep gold thread-woven wallpaper, and silver-leather-lined, barrel-shaped wingback chairs. CONTINUED...

...CONTINUED The centerpiece is an abstract painting that looks like a ghostly coil of sea coral. The room—timeless, clean and masculine—could easily be the Sterling Cooper advertising agency from *Mad Men*, reimagined for the 21st century.

I even eye Don Draper's favorite tippie on the cocktail list—an Old Fashioned. This one, however, is glammed up with a touch of Graham Beck bubbly. I opt for a Night and Day, a spicy, orange, Champagne- and cognac-infused elixir whose sweetness is smartly foiled by a touch of bitters.

The wine list, impressive, is so deep that my wife defaults to a glass of pinot grigio listed on the back of the cocktail list. Our waitress, sensing that my wife isn't committed to this choice, returns with two wine glasses and signals for the sommelier, who wears an Advanced Sommelier pin on his left lapel. Before I can dub him a total cork dork, he introduces himself as Dan the Man.

Daniel Pilkey is quite the man. Maybe Ria's best asset, he's a 29-year-old vino wunderkind who seems as smart and passionate about wine as Chicago's already proven sommeliers, like Joe Catterson at Alinea or Fernando Beteta, most recently of NoMI. Like Beteta, Pilkey is loose. He could likely rattle off the tasting characteristics on a vertical of Château Margaux like a baseball freak reciting the stats of Willie Mays, but you wouldn't mind grabbing a wave with him (he's a Southern California native and surfer), throwing down a bottle of PBR and talking a little smack.

He pours a small sample of my wife's wine choice alongside a Château Gravelle-Lacoste sauvignon blanc blend from Bordeaux that's bright with citrus and grapefruit. The pinot grigio, by comparison, is tight and dull.

My wife appreciates the alternative. It's a nice foil for the rich amuse of broccoli purée studded with black truffle that arrives, a plate so indulgent and tasty that famed broccoli hater George H. W. Bush would probably even dig it.

Pilkey's adaptability is important, for he serves a wide range of clientele. Right now, sitting around us, I see a couple pecking at each other like love-struck starlings, expense accounters talking shop, and a well-behaved young girl who commands the middle of the dining room like a little Eloise, snacking on pizza and wielding a crayon like a scepter.

While her parents guzzle foie gras and truffles, we throw down lobster and caviar girded with blood orange tidbits (meticulously shorn of their bitter pith) and delicate celery leaves drizzled with citrus sabayon. The citrus coupled with the popping bubbles of fish roe launches the buttery lobster flesh on a fizzy, salty wave of delight down my throat.

A plank of crispy-skinned turbot swims in a tarragon- and leek-perfumed broth filled with clouds of caramelized cauliflower and silky clams. This is killer on its own, but is elevated by Pilkey's pairing of a Terlan Müller Thurgau Alto Adige, a white varietal that has similar taste characteristics to a Riesling but isn't as finicky and is able to grow in many different soils and climate types. This one features grassy notes that meld with the anise flavor of the tarragon.



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A hunk of rare squab dusted with mace and star anise would be perfect if not for the slight dryness of the accompanying sweetbread. Similarly, well-seasoned duck breast flanked by sweet baby turnips and a fat lobe of pistachio-crusted foie gras would have been an A+, if not for the slightly soggy skin on the duck.

Despite the minor missteps, McLeod's cooking is a triumph of technique, and the \$40 entrées I questioned earlier are justifiable. Ria is a five-star restaurant waiting to happen, derailed only by minor details such as an empty cocktail glass ignored or an almond baba cake that's a little dry and bread-like. (Next time, I may skip dessert and let the mignardise, a duo of perfectly spongy almond financiers, satisfy my sweet tooth.)

Though our meal ends with this precious mignardise, and began with not just the broccoli-black truffle amuse-bouche, but a pre-amuse amuse of flaky gougères, it's not that fussy. Our waitress never refers to the gougères by their French name, just calling them Gruyère-stuffed cheese puffs. You appreciate the luxury, but you don't get bogged down in it. Because they're flexible, so am I—let them call the restaurant whatever they damn please. I'll still be a fan. ■



From top: Lobster with caviar, celery leaves and blood orange sabayon; the lounge separating Ria and Balsan, the Elysian's less formal restaurant.