



House Rules

Just down the street from his popular spot Gemini Bistro, Jason Paskewitz opens a neighborhood joint that's classic meets creative. | By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier |

Jason Paskewitz, chef/partner of recently opened Rustic House restaurant in Lincoln Park, is the antidote to the *Ladies' Home Journal* circa 1955 aesthetic that continues to dominate modern food media.

A few years ago on an episode of *Food Network Challenge*, he punctuated the usual mix of smiley soccer moms in sun-dappled kitchens with his Brooklyn-bred brashness during a sandwich throwdown against chef Ben Ford of Ford's Filling Station in Culver City, Calif., and son of Harrison Ford. "He was talking a little bit of smack the night before," says Paskewitz. "I told him I would Chewbacca-slap him across the mouth." Though Ford bested Paskewitz on the plate, JP trash-talked Indiana Jones Jr. into the ground.

What's compelling about Paskewitz is not only that he's always had a giant chip on his shoulder, but he also knows how to make the perfect potato chip. In a world full of culinary-school dropouts yearning to be the next Rachael Ray, Paskewitz's precise kitchen skills have stood out. But it's been chefs Grant Achatz, Homaro Cantu and the artist formerly known as Graham Elliot Bowles who have claimed the local spotlight, while Paskewitz toiled in their shadow.

Maybe this was because though he had a mouth like a sailor, he cooked like a country club captain. People didn't know what to make of him. He didn't foam and laser stuff. He just roasted and puréed. Whether it was at his short-lived namesake JP Chicago or his other Lincoln Park restaurant Gemini Bistro, his technique was impeccable. His crab cake at Gemini, a cushion of sweet lump crab topped with golden house-baked croutons, rises above the '80s cliché and redeems the form.

At Rustic House he's pretty much following this "classic with a twist" formula. Though with its flickering LED candelabra chandeliers, rustic faux-wood chairs and English-cottage-worthy stone mantle fireplace, a night at Rustic House is as classic as it gets. There are no twists on display. The room is so straight and comfy, I imagine dining here is what it feels like having dinner at Augusta National Golf Club. In fact, befitting a Masters champion like Tiger Woods there are two older men sitting a few tables away wearing green sports jackets. The diners here not only smell like money, they dress like it too. CONTINUED...

UPPING THE BAR

From left: The cozy bar at Rustic House. Right: Wood-grilled octopus with tomato confit



Rustic House

RATING ★★★

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rustichousechicago.com

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, ambiance and service.

WHAT TO WEAR *Your country club finery*

WHAT TO ORDER *Honey-peppered bacon, house-rolled gnocchi, duck l'orange and the chocolate soufflé*

WHAT TO KNOW *Though masquerading as a savory side dish, the creamed corn brûlée makes an excellent dessert*

WHO GOES *Lincoln Park neighbors*

WHAT IT COSTS *Snacks \$5, starters \$9-\$17, entrées \$17-\$36, desserts \$7-\$10*

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...CONTINUED And there amongst the Lincoln Parkers and Old Town denizens is Paskewitz with his buzzed head, prominent brow and solid barrel chest working the room. Though he looks a touch like the puggish footballer Wayne Rooney of Manchester United, he captains these captains of Chicago industry and woos their wives with winks. Sure, his charm is infectious, but he's effective because he's already won their stomachs.

Even though Rustic House has been open for six weeks, many of these folks have already been here three or four times. Though they can afford to eat at Charlie Trotter's or Alinea as much as they want, it's too much fuss for a daily meal. What they really want, and what they've missed since Kith and Kin up the street shuttered, is that ultimate neighborhood restaurant, the comforting, home-dining-room-like American Bistro.

And that's exactly what Paskewitz has given them.

Each night, the beautiful in-wall rotisserie is larded with a different protein while rows of flickering blue roasting flames beckon. Do you go for the luscious plank of Kurobuta pork on Tuesday or the pink fat marbled finery of Saturday's prime rib? For those who can only choose one, I say the mahogany duck l'orange with sweet citrus-kissed sauce served on Wednesday is the way to go.

Thankfully, the hand-rolled gnocchi tossed with hunks of sautéed foie gras, parsley and crispy garlic chips is available every day. The pasta is so light, it's like eating potato air, and the duck liver bursts like a water balloon with comforting buttery fat.

Service, like the décor and food, starts out comforting. Unsure whether Rustic House's glass pour of Graff Riesling has enough acid to stand up to the maple-glazed pork belly dragged through a recently breached quail egg and topped with a forkful of tiny perfectly diced cubes of potato hash, our waiter offers us a sample pour to confirm. (It does.)

But, when the green-jacket-wearing dudes arrive, our server drops our table like a hot Yukon Gold potato, returning only to push dessert. It seems the doting at Rustic House is directly proportional to the number of bottles of Turnbull Merlot a table orders.

The kitchen, however, is cooking for everyone, and two hunks of flaky pancetta-wrapped monkfish perched on the plate like a couple of modern apartment towers

ameliorates the indifferent service. And, if that doesn't work, a few cognac snifters filled with Paskewitz's snack of honey-peppered bacon—the rich man's sweet



HOME SWEET HOME
Clockwise from top right:
Working the Rotisole
rotisserie; a 20-ounce
bone-in rib-eye; chocolate
soufflé. Below: Setting
up for dinner



and spicy answer to gas station beef jerky—definitely puts things right.

The only edible injustice meted out to us is a chalky batch of ground duck meat wrapped in otherwise tender ravioli wrappers. The luxuriant cherry compote and veal sauce on the plate can't rehydrate this parched confit. And though the liquor-smacked grapefruit, lime, soda and tequila-infused Pomelito cocktail washes away the memory of the dish, it leaves its own soapy harsh residue. The cocktail quality varies—a rum-filled Pineapple Ginger Smash was delicious and refreshing while a Mountain Mule (a Moscow Mule made with Moon Mt. Vodka) was too limey—so you're better off sticking with the well-curated glass pour and bottle offering menu.

Maybe the greatest illustration of Paskewitz's technique is his simple chocolate soufflé. Outside of a few local bistros, most restaurants have stopped serving them—they take too long to bake and are prone to deflating like a breached Goodyear blimp. Frankly when I read the offering on the Rustic House menu, I assumed it was probably a fake "soufflé," some lava-cake-like knockoff. But what I got was a magazine-cover-worthy ramekin filled with airy puffed cake redolent with eggy perfume. Of course, Paskewitz larded this beauty with a few different forms of richness-cutting orange-flavored garnishes, including an explode-in-your-mouth orange "sphere" and a tiny pitcher of silky Grand Marnier sauce.

I don't know if I've had a better soufflé. In fact I was pretty sure this is what it felt like to be Chewbacca-slapped with flavor. Lincoln Park, take note: The force is strong with Rustic House. ■