



SETTING THE MOOD Vincent's dining room gets prepped for a night of service to a heavily Andersonville set.

Dutch Touch

HB chef Joncarl Lachman does double duty and brings the Netherlands to Andersonville

| By Michael Nagrant | Photography by Anthony Tahlier |

Were I like Vincent van Gogh—a troubled turpentine-guzzling, oil-paint-eating manic depressive who's the namesake of the new Andersonville bistro Vincent—my waitress tonight is exactly the kind of woman on whom I'd bestow a part of my ear.

Her hair, dyed with punky streaks, splays out of a kerchief as she hustles around the candlelit room, attending to a set of well-to-do diners, the kind who don cashmere cardigans and Oliver Peoples frames. The focus at Vincent is on traditional Dutch food, and the menu, an unfamiliar mélange of words with one too many vowels and a surplus of consonants (zaansemosterdsoep, maatjesharing and zonder), engenders uncertainty. The waitress knows this, and so she is resolute. As she bends our way to corral an order, her tattooed forearm slices the air and her fingers dart across my menu, highlighting what I must try.

She starts my night with the maatjesharing shot, a plank of pickled herring flanked by a tiny crystal goblet of juniper-scented liquor (Bols Genever, the grandfather of modern gin), and a sliver of pickle. This is like the Dutch version of a tequila shot—only I think I'd rather lick, slam and suck my way to a Jose Cuervo hangover than try it. The pinkish-brown glop of herring looks like Gene Simmons' unfurled tongue, and as much as I love Kiss, I

do not relish a proxy make-out session with the band.

But, when in Amsterdam... and, so, down the hatch. For my bravery, I'm rewarded with a buttery, slightly funky, brown-sugar-glazed bite of fish, complemented by the piney splash of the Genever and the sour tang of the pickle. I'm smitten. This should be a tradition in American bars.

Chef/owner Joncarl Lachman is also behind HB Home Bistro, the lively BYO in Boystown, but Vincent is a moodier ball game, with low lighting, dark woods and lots of mirrors. Across the room, I spy a riff on a famous pipe-smoking van Gogh self-portrait. Fog roils across Balmoral Avenue and sidles up to the plate glass windows. Amidst glinting swan-necked stemware, chocolate wainscoting and plush banquettes, I could be in a Victorian parlor, dining with the master himself. A couple more maatjesharings and the dining room would even be swirling à la his *Starry Night*. Time to switch to cocktails.

Vincent's drink list was designed by mixologist Adam Seger, who has built a cult following at River North's Nacional 27 for his intricate use of spices. The Spice Trader, a coconut cream cocktail made with Bols Genever, jasmine tea and Seger's own Hum, a rum infused with cardamom and hibiscus, drinks like a punchy milkshake. CONTINUED...

Vincent

RATING ★★

1475 W. Balmoral Ave.,
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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.

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WHAT TO WEAR: *Brooks Brothers and Ann Taylor.*

WHAT TO ORDER: *Foie gras, pork belly, bread pudding.*

WHEN TO GO: *When you need to warm up on a cold winter night.*

WHAT TO KNOW: *The three-course \$25 farmers market inspired prix-fixe meal is a nicely priced intro to Vincent.*

WHO GOES: *Andersonville neighbors and people who get tired of waiting for Great Lake pizza next door.*

WHAT IT COSTS: *Small plates \$9-\$14; large plates \$14-\$21; desserts \$8.*



Clockwise from top left: Housemade pâté and headcheese; moules frites; the beautifully back-lit bar; a board of aged gouda finishes the three-course, \$25 prix-fixe; chef/owner Joncarl Lachman hard at work.



Amidst the chocolate wainscoting and plush banquettes, I could be in a Victorian parlor, dining with van Gogh himself. A couple more maatjesharing shots and the dining room would even be swirling *à la* his *Starry Night*. Time to switch to cocktails.

...CONTINUED The sweetness is a nice complement to a lobe of seared foie gras sprinkled with a uniform dice of sweet quince, one of Vincent's small plates. Though foie is everywhere these days, the salt and pepper on this version reminds you that few people ever get this simple seasoning so right.

Vincent's menu is coursed out fairly traditionally, with "small plates" equivalent to appetizers and "large plates" equivalent to entrées. I dig into a Dutch onion soup enriched with duck confit and topped with a dark, crisp raft of pumpernickel dripping with gooey Leiden cheese. It's good, though not quite as beefy and rich as its French cousin, and thus a little disappointing. I turn my spoon to a bowl of tangy rich mustard soup (the aforementioned zaansemosterdsoep), flecked with anise-scented bits of tarragon pesto and sweet crab. This time, the warmth spreads across my chest.

The soup brings on a hearty satiety, and reflexively I close my eyes. The clinks of silverware and the hum of the crowd are no longer the product of 2010 Chicago. Instead, I'm in Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's *Moulin Rouge* painting. The Brooks Brothers-wearing attorneys of Andersonville and their Ann Taylor-clad wives have given way to images of cape-clad Parisian men and women in frilly necked Victorian dresses and feathery headpieces. Somewhere, beyond this picture, the Moulin Rouge's founder, swashbuckling bon vivant Joseph Oller, is holding court with a table of can-can girls.

Thanks to Vincent's own impresario, Lachman, things are just as vibrant outside of my imagination, with a gregarious crowd. Lachman has always been known as a chef's chef, the kind of guy who eschews fussy complicated ego-driven plates in favor of simple comfort food, the kind of

stuff you want to eat after a tough shift on the line. He spends as much time in the dining room making sure everyone's having a good time (or as the Dutch might say, spreading *gezelligheid*, which loosely translates as cozy, fun, quaint or nice atmosphere) as he does at his kitchen pass.

He's also an impromptu food runner, delivering a bowl of steaming mussels larded with Portuguese linguica sausage, ribbons of caramelized onion and orange zest. Unfortunately, the broth has a bitter, burnt quality and doesn't rival the mussels served at nearby Hopleaf. The accompanying mountain of frites, which at first I deride for their uniform pre-frozen look, are so addictive, I eat the monstrous golden pile into a molehill in seconds.

Though brown-sugar-cured pork belly is luscious with crackling skin, the accompanying hock of suckling pig is drier and wrinklier than Keith Richards at a Palm Springs rehab facility. Tempering the dryness is a tangle of *zuurkool*, which is not a cousin of the demonic spirit from *Ghostbusters*, but rather a buttery, fizzy bit of sauerkraut.

For dessert, the waitress guides us to a Dreamsicle, a parfait-like riff on the classic Creamsicle. Unfortunately, the concoction is cloying with a slick texture, and comes off like an outtake recipe from a Cool Whip promotional cookbook. Bread pudding, covered in a gooey brown sugar sludge, is a satisfying alternative, but with Pasticceria Natalina a doughnut's toss away, you might save some room by skipping dessert altogether.

Despite these inconsistencies, Lachman's Dutch fare is original, and the spirit of his restaurant is exciting. It takes real courage to stake your reputation on food no one's ever heard of. And so while the waitress may have my ear, for these things, Lachman will always have my belly. ■