

Eat 'N' Greet

For 2010, meet a brand-new Custom House, a bakery boom and true Italian pizza



Custom House tacks on the Tavern surname this month. */nscr/* New chef Aaron Deal.

Q&A

New Deal This month, Custom House in Printer's Row rebrands itself as ultra-urban Custom House Tavern, where American fare marries ethnic flavors—like in a burger topped with French foie gras. Leading the change is South Carolinian culinary star **Aaron Deal**. —*Michael Nigrant*

You came from Tristan, a white-tablecloth spot in Charleston. How did you end up here? I loved Charleston and the city was great to me, but I was looking for a level of enthusiasm and energy in a city that was greater. I just served sous vide turkey on Thanksgiving here at Custom House. That might have scared some people in Charleston.

You were featured nationally on CBS' morning show, cooking Oscar party food. What was that like? I was really worried I wouldn't be able to rip off my chef jacket in time to show my tuxedo T-shirt before they cut away, but I did.

What's your vision for Custom House Tavern? When you're in the dining room, there's no mistaking that you're in the city. From our window you can see the lights, cars and sounds. We want to celebrate that with American food. And I'm sneaking in some of my favorite dishes, like she-crab soup and foie gras pot de crème. It's like a dessert and a cheese course in one plate.

Anything you miss about the South? Biscuits and gravy. But we did get in a Benton's country ham last week, so I'm doing all right. 500 S. Dearborn St., 312.523.0200, customhouse.cc.



Prosciutto tops a pie at Nella.

MINI REVIEW

Rolling in Dough

You knew Lincoln Park's **Nella Pizzeria Napoletana** was serious when it imported volcanic brick from Mt. Vesuvius for its oven—along with an Italian oven maker to build it. Then there's fourth-generation *pizzaiola* Nella Grassano, formerly of Spacca Napoli, making the pies (check out her moves in the overhead mirror in front of the oven), and Mia Francesca's Scott Harris as a partner. So does Nella live up to the hype? *Sì, signore!* The pies—16 plus a special or two—boast a chewy crust with a touch of char and the right balance of ingredients to dough, as in the prosciutto, smoked mozzarella and parmesan one we tried. Salads are flavorful, though pricey for the size. Next time, we'll just get another pizza instead. 2423 N. Clark St., 773.327.3400, pizzerianella.com. —*L.S.*

TASTE TEST

Egg Heads

Traditionally, the way to test a chef's expertise is through his eggs. Three of Chicago's newest restaurants take it one step further by hatching sexed-up versions of an age-old classic: eggs Benedict. —*Lisa Shames*

► Gemini Bistro

Chef/partner Jason Paskewitz hits the restaurant by 6:30AM on Sundays to make what he calls the secret to his eggs Benedict: a hollandaise that's "fluffy, light and yummy good." But for us, it's the meaty crab cake, in lieu of the traditional Canadian bacon, that makes Gemini's Benedict all it's cracked up to be. 2075 N. Lincoln Ave., 773.525.2522, geminibistrochicago.com.



SHELL SHOCKED Gemini Bistro's stunning spin on eggs Benedict subs crab cakes for Canadian bacon.

► Nana

Latin twists spice up an organic menu at this breakfast, lunch and weekend brunch spot, says partner Omar Solis. The eggs Benedict ("Nanadict") subs pupusas, cheese-stuffed corn flatbreads, for the English muffin. House-made chorizo—soyrizo for veg-heads—joins the poached eggs, all topped with a zesty poblano cream sauce. 3267 S. Halsted St., 312.929.2486, nanaorganic.com.

► LM

New Lincoln Square spot LM scrambles Benedict's constitution from head to toe: The ham is made from Berkshire pork that's been brined for a week, says chef Bradford Phillips; the Roma tomatoes are roasted to intensify the flavors; the baby arugula adds a peppery bite; and the sauce is choron, a béarnaise that's blended with tomato purée. 4539 N. Lincoln Ave., 773.942.7585, lmrestaurant.com.

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