



## Cibo Matto

RATING: ★★★

201 N. State St., 312.239.9500  
Dinner Mon.-Sat. 5:30PM-11PM;  
Lunch Tues.-Fri. 11:30AM-2PM.

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:** *Brooks Brothers fitted shirts for the guys, Pucci dresses for the women.*

**WHAT TO ORDER:** *Animelle (a sweetbread course with changing seasonal accompaniments), spaghetti alla chitarra, lemon ricotta zeppole.*

**WHEN TO GO:** *Midweek.*

**WHAT TO KNOW:** *Chef Stein created the small bites for Roof, the Wit's rooftop lounge, a great place for pre-dinner cocktails.*

**WHO GOES:** *Downtown office-dwellers and Wit hotel guests.*

**WHAT IT COSTS:** *Appetizers \$11-\$16; entrées \$27-\$37; desserts \$9.*

# Italian Job

**Sexy and sleek, Cibo Matto works it with tastebud-popping fare from former mk chef Todd Stein | By Michael Nagrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier |**

Whether I'm relishing framed tattoo art of menacing skulls (Blue 13) or wearing jeans to a four star restaurant (Avenues), I'm not much for the old rules of food writing. However, there is one I hold sacred: A dining critic should always strive to be anonymous. And yet, in the era of quid pro quo blogging and the naming of a *New York Times* food critic whose picture is widely available on the Internet, I feel my stance makes me tragically unhip, the food writing equivalent of a Barry Manilow record. However, my recent visits to the modern Italian Cibo Matto—the crown jewel of the three restaurants in the avant-garde Wit Hotel—have reinforced my faith in preserving anonymity.

For without anonymity, would the cocktail waitress have poured sparkling water for my wife when she asked for still? Would she have brought us the more expensive, large format bottle of Pellegrino without asking what size we preferred? And when I

asked her to identify one of the key ingredients in my Donna Matto cocktail (which turns out to be Tuaca, a vanilla and citrus liqueur) would she have merely said, "It's Italian"? Not likely.

However, the stumbling blocks in the service at Cibo Matto do make me more confident of my assessment of the food. After all, since they obviously have no idea I'm here as a reviewer, the food I'm being served is the same as everyone around me—and it's outstanding. There are plenty of winners courtesy of chef Todd Stein, from crispy sweetbreads to a black squid ink pasta that ranks among the best plates I've had all year.

If chef Stein is king, then 120-seat Cibo is a mini palace, rife with the majesty of ruby red banquettes and pale blue high-back booths. Choice seats, alive with the pleasant buzz of well-heeled after-workers, offer a view of a glinting glass-paneled wine

**SHARP WIT** *Clockwise from top left: Cibo Matto's cheese and salumi case; grilled tuna with cranberry beans, pickled eggplant and Cerignola olive relish; Cibo's communal table. Below: The restaurant's ceiling fresco, painted by Chicago artist Todd Murphy.*







All of the plates are executed so well, it's almost possible to think I've been discovered. Then again, I see chef Stein, clad in his white chef's coat, so focused on expediting food that he never has a moment to glance our way.



From top: Fennel- and cinnamon-dusted crispy sweetbreads with heirloom apples, apple purée and apple saba; chef Todd Stein.

...CONTINUED case and an enchanting ceiling fresco, a Michelangelo meets Dalí photorealistic pastoral of backlit cherry blossoms, jaunting butterflies, and floating fruit and people, all from artist and Chicago native Todd Murphy. Unfortunately, tonight we're tucked away at a side-table Siberia next to the kitchen doors. After being ignored for 15 minutes, we're forced to wrangle a waiter away from the guffawing group beside us.

Our persistence pays off in a compassionate general manager who steps in, apologizes profusely for the wait, and—in a move that would please the King of Spain—comps us our drinks. He also takes our order and expedites a duo of appetizers, including the crispy-crusted, silky-centered sweetbread girded by rich fried artichokes that are lightened by the acid from an ethereal preserved lemon drizzle.

Sated by the sweetbread and a lush glass of cherry-, plum- and spice-infused 2005 Cantine Valpane Barbera del Monferrato (at \$10, the best and cheapest of by-the-glass red wine offerings, although

the waitress does stumble at comparing them), we don't much mind the wait for our plates to arrive.

It's now that we try the squid ink pasta, its midnight shade beautifully stark against a pristine white porcelain dish. The tasty tension of tongue-smiting chilis, sweet crab and soft, soothing mint tops a delicate nest of hand-crafted spaghetti. A bread salad cradled halibut girded with cookbook photo-worthy grill marks, succulent and flaking off its attached bone, might have won for best of the night had it not directly followed the pasta dish, the glory of which is still lingering on my palate.

The cheese list—six Italian, one Spanish, one local—is solid, though similar choices, and then some, can be found at Spiaggia. Better to order the *burrata e pesche*, comprised of peaches, burrata, almond pesto and wild arugula. There's nothing better than the perfect peach, except for one larded with creamy tufts of cheese and crisp, nutty wild greens.

All of the plates are executed so well, it's almost possible to think I have been discovered. Then again, as my wife and I sit 10 feet away from the open kitchen, I see chef Stein, clad in his white chef's coat and mod, thick-framed glasses, so focused on expediting food that he never even has a moment to glance our way.

As I parse a mocha torte, which isn't quite as memorable as the savory fare (none of our desserts, which include a chocolate bomboloni and zeppole, or traditional Italian deep-fried dough balls, really are, though the lemon ricotta zeppole, served with a chocolate ganache, win for best of the bunch), I wonder why Stein, who has opened some of Cleveland's best restaurants, hasn't really had a break-out moment here in Chicago.

As an avid music lover it's hard for me not to compare the situation to the 1990s indie rock band Cibo Matto, whose talented bassist was an unregarded dude named Sean Lennon. His father, John, cast a pretty long shadow, and likewise, as chef at mk, Stein had to contend with the bright lights of mentor Michael Kornick. Now that he's on his own, he's becoming a bona fide star—and in the end, spotty service definitely won't bring him down. Besides, while I treasure my anonymity, my non-traditional stance doesn't really care about perfect service anyway. ■