

FOOD DRINK | REVIEW



Acadia

★★★★½
1639 S. Wabash Ave.,
312.360.9500

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

Banker chic

WHAT TO ORDER

Charcuterie plate, pork belly, lobster pie and duck

WHAT TO KNOW

The kitchen will create a tasting menu or portion courses into multiple plates for those who want to share.

WHAT IT COSTS

First \$8-\$16; Second \$23-\$34; Dessert \$10

DINNER IS SERVED Clockwise from left: The main dining room; beets, frisée and chevre; foie gras with lemon gel; Wagyu beef with mushroom conserva. Below: Swan Creek duck with foie gras custard



The Return of Haute Cuisine

Contemporary Acadia shoots to the top of Chicago's fine dining scene with a stunning array of artfully plated dishes. | *By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier |*

If fine dining is dead, the folks at Acadia, a new modern contemporary American restaurant in the South Loop, certainly didn't hear the bell tolling for it. Acadia has transformed the funeral for luxury into quite the rousing wake. Like Jean Valjean leading a revolution, Acadia has doubled down in these grave times of uninspired small plates, cast-off bits of offal and elbow-mashing communal tables, and fought back with impeccable technique—and a powder keg larder stuffed with truffles, foie and lobster.

Like Valjean, I don't mind stealing bread from the mouths of decadence. Though I love what I do, it's rare that I'm not aware I'm eating professionally. And yet, as my body sinks into Acadia's soft charcoal chenille banquette my forearms rest upon a warm wood tabletop, my eyes gaze past taupe walls, cedar-trimmed doorways and the shimmering, beaded waterfall-like

room divider. A Buddhist Zen calm descends over me, and I just am.

I am my toddler son standing in front of Cinderella's castle shaking the hand of Mickey Mouse for the very first time. My eyes glint, but they're no match for the spotlight in General Manager/Sommelier Jason Prah's own. Prah, a barrel of a man with a cropped reddish beard, is the epitome of genial.

And why wouldn't he be? Bacchus has smiled upon him. He has mined the unlikeliest of wine regions, like Slovenia, for a mineral-rich 2008 Erzetec "Rebula" Ribolla Gialla, and New York's Seneca Lake for nicely acidic 2008 Hermann Weimer Riesling.

Prah has struck it rich in wine, with a talented bartender, Michael Simon, and a waitstaff who all seem to be studying to be master sommeliers. Simon's suspenders spring taut as his inked CONTINUED...

...CONTINUED forearm sinews twitch with each jolt of a silver shaker, just before rivulets of Grand Marnier roll into a highball, which he then tops with the most delicious cloud of vanilla bean foam (Cognac Dreamsicle cocktail). He appeals to a foodie's yen for authenticity with a deep knowledge of his craft, but his exuberance appeals to a scenester looking for a bit of fun. And on any given night, the front bar area at Acadia is packed with both sets of folks throwing down lobster rolls, burgers and oysters from the separate bar menu.

Prah's partner in crime, chef Ryan McCaskey, doesn't exude much radiance himself. He stalks the room from time to time and breaks a smile about as often as the sensei of the Cobra Kai dojo in *The Karate Kid*. I suspect his serious demeanor might explain why a guy who helmed a four-star kitchen at suburban Courtright's, and did time at Tizi Melloul, Rushmore and Vivere, is a relative

Trebbiano wine grapes, the precursor to good balsamic vinegar) I may contract gout.

Gout be damned. Who could give up a fourth course featuring slabs of glistening pork belly perched on tangy nests of wine-braised cabbage and accompanied by crispy pork skin and candied mustard seed?

Moreover, who could leave behind entrées, denoted as "second" on the Acadia menu, like a fifth course of deconstructed lobster pot pie featuring a whole fat tail flanked by pearl onions and anise-perfumed pommes dauphine (crispy puffs of deep-fried mashed potatoes)? Certainly not my waitress, who claims she was doing shots of the velvety bisque in the kitchen before she came out to pour our own into the bowl tableside.

Further, if I can get McCaskey to tell me where he keeps the extra foie gras custard served alongside crispy-skinned, perfectly rare Gunthorp Farm duck straddling bits of ginger snap dust and sour cherry gel on my sixth course, well, I'll wash dishes in the kitchen for a week for free.

Ironically, this candy store does not serve great dessert. I'm having a hard time remembering the puddle of chocolate cremeaux, basically a fancy pudding studded with candied huckleberry and relatively bland buttermilk "sponge." I do dig the micro whoopie pie mignardise. You should take a cue from my dining companion, who chooses to drink his dessert, for there's a nice, focused list of cordials and dessert wines on offer.

Acadia is almost perfect. Dessert could have been better. The brioche could have been warmer and a touch thicker. The pacing between courses could have been a bit faster. But Acadia is a kissing cousin of spots like Alinea or L2O, delightfully without the wallet-thumping check average.

If McCaskey's seriousness betrays worry, I'd bet it's over how he can afford to charge such reasonable gastropub prices for such incredibly precise technique-driven food. And, even if the prices are fine, Acadia is located in a fairly barren section of the South Loop, next to a vacant lot. I drove past it twice and mistook it for a potential medical clinic or storefront office building. I'm happy to keep my hand out, but also happy to pay more if it means longevity and evolution for the restaurant. If indeed fine dining is dead, well, then whatever Acadia is, may it live long. ■

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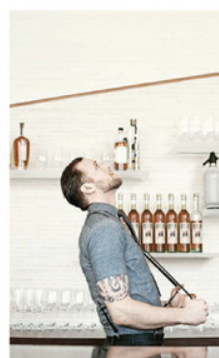
unknown. You can imagine him telling his sous chef to "sweep the leg" of a line cook off his game. To quote the Joker, "Why so serious?"

Maybe it's because my fellow diners and I are getting giddy over an appetizer "risotto" where a fine dice of Yukon Gold potato mimicking creamy al dente Arborio rice is carpeted with shag of shaved black truffle and a hail of green apple that bursts tangy and bright. (Note: While the menu is separated into "first" and "second" courses, with a couple of fellow diners it's easy to create a shareable tasting menu.)

As any father knows, when the kid has been to the candy store, stuffed with sugar and allowed to roam, things will break. And it's true the dude next to me, whose steroidal-looking biceps threaten to tear, Hulk-like, through the sleeves of a skin-tight American Apparel V-neck T-shirt, is drunk on one too many drams of Duval Leroy brut. I'm a little concerned he's going to pass out face first in his sunchoke veloute.

As for me, though, I'm kicking myself under the table with delight over a second course featuring tiny dots of apple curry butter, squares of lemon gelée and a fat golden coin of foie gras torchon coated in malted crispies. I'm too riveted waiting for the next course to get up and do any damage.

I also stuff my face with a third course of wild boar terrine and slivers of house-cured duck ham. In fact, I fear if I lard one more slice of warm brioche (a plate of toast refreshed from the kitchen mid-course) with chicken liver and mosto cotto (a syrupy concentrate of



UPPING THE BAR
Clockwise from top: Mixologist Michael Simon; a juniper sazerac; spice cake with carrot sorbet; "risotto" made with Yukon Gold potatoes and paired with Perigold truffles and fine herbs