



diningout

BY MICHAEL NAGRANT email diningout@suntimes.com | Follow @michaelnagrnt

SOUTHERN STYLE

At Carriage House in Wicker Park, the great resurrection is the food itself



Chef Mark Steuer shows of the Carolina clam boil at the Carriage House Restaurant on West Division. | AL PODGORSKI -SUN-TIMES

Maybe the only cuisine cliché bigger than pork right now is all things Southern. There are food porn spreads of country hams in every major food magazine. Bourbon is now on equal footing with Miller Lite in Wrigleyville. Chicago, which once counted Popeye's as the best purveyor of fried yardbird, is overrun with crackling chicken.

Grabbing hold of the trend with both hands and doing a decent job furthering it: Chef Mark Steuer's Carriage House in Wicker Park.

As a devout worshipper of pork and carbs and all things comfort food, you'd think I'd be tickled by this renaissance. But I'm also predisposed to be wary of trends and stereotypes, to separate the crass money grabs from the real deals.

Despite Carriage House's checklist Southern vintage decor, it comes up lacking at the comfort level. If you're about to sit down over heart-threatening and rib-sticking goodies, you want to be enveloped by a blanket of warmth. But the reflective white walls and loft-style heating vents cast a bit of a glare. The surfaces, including the backs of the dining chairs and the shiny floor, are hard and unforgiving. Ultimately Carriage House has more the rusticity of a barn, when what you really want is the cushy reassurance of a Southern lawyer's living room.

The service at Carriage House is also jarring. Our waiter, as though he is an extra from the vintage indie movie "Swingers," describes dishes as "money" and "killer." He never says, "Hey, bro, you totally don't want that dish!" But you can imagine it happening.

Ultimately, the great resurrection at Carriage House is the food. It has a



The skillet cornbread smothered in peach jam and foie gras butter is a cloudlike tasty treat. | AL PODGORSKI - SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

CARRIAGE HOUSE

★★

1700 W. Division;
(773) 384-9700; carriage
housechicago.com

Hours: Tuesday - Sunday 5 p.m. to late

Prices: Shared plates: \$6-\$15; entrees \$27-\$34; desserts \$8

Try: Fried chicken thigh, South Carolina clam boil and crispy braised pork shoulder

In a bite: Traditional and reimagined Southern specialties in Wicker Park.

KEY: ★★★★★ Extraordinary;
★★★★ Excellent;
★★★ Very Good; ★ Good;
Zero stars: Poor

level of reassurance and cures what ails you in a way that the waiter and the room do not. Chef Steuer's (Hot Chocolate, The Bedford) dishes are consistent, well-seasoned and balanced. Almost everything I eat here, save for the Carolina Gold rice balls — deep-fried and stuffed with oozing pimiento cheese — is well-executed. The problem with the rice balls, which also are larded with pork neck gravy and sweet potato puree, is that they're fat on top of fat. Steuer understands this, and that's why he includes a pickled cabbage wrapper on the plate; but the cabbage is stinky with sulfur, and any acid it does have is overpowered by the heaviness of the dish's other

ingredients.

Steuer's clam boil on the other hand is a nice salvo against the endless Belgian ale-steamed mussels plates that seem to be everywhere these days. A sweet, hard cider perfumed with roast fennel and the anise-tinge of tarragon makes up the slurpworthy brew in this bowl. The tiny tender clams are succulent, and salty bits of Tasso ham reward the diner who goes dunking to the bottom of the broth with the yeasty slices of Pullman loaf served on the side.

Though fried chicken also is everywhere, it's impossible to discount Carriage House's silky, juicy rolled thighs glistening with local honey served with a bottle of housemade sweet potato hot sauce. The hot sauce in particular is engaging because it is not all vinegar and pepper, but instead full of a slow-building heat and a nice sugary starch. The chicken comes with flaccid bread and butter pickles, which I somehow miss, and thus, order an extra side of. I feel the waiter should caution me here, but he just eggs me on.

One side that I have no reservation about is fluffy cloudlike cornbread served in a cast iron skillet and smothered in peach jam and foie gras butter. It seems that Steuer's real skill is taking dishes I've grown tired of and reinventing them in a form for which I yearn.

Braised pork shoulder gets a similar treatment. Because it's cheap and tasty, it's everywhere. But few serve it with the delightful sweet/sour combo of smoked



The braised pork shoulder gets a unique touch with a sweet/sour combo of smoked nectarines and pickled peppers.

nectarines and pickled peppers that Steuer does. The only issue is that the menu bills it as "crispy" and the skin here is sogged down by the garnish.

Because Steuer is a veteran of award-winning pastry chef Mindy Segal's Hot Chocolate, I hope dessert will be stellar. Execution-wise, it is. The pecan sundae is the right

combination of contrasts: crunchy, fresh, hot, sweet pralines and a lustrous ribbon of bourbon-soaked caramel against cool, smooth ice cream. But, the idea is fairly straightforward, not too far afield from the kind of thing you get at a TGI Friday's. (Friday's would not have housemade pralines or bourbon caramel, but the satisfaction I derive is similar.)

I want Steuer to be as inventive with his dessert flavor combos as he is with his savory foods. I expect that Carriage House will be compared to Andersonville's Big Jones, another Southern-skewing Chicago restaurant. Big Jones exudes the warmth I yearn for, and has a sincerity and devotion to history and provenance driven by its chef Paul Fehribach. If Carriage House is to compete, Steuer, a South Carolina native, also needs to dig deep and evoke his Southern and culinary heritages in earnest.

Michael Nagrant is a local freelance writer. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.



The juicy fried chicken thigh gets an added boost from the Carriage House's housemade sweet potato hot sauce.