

eat & drink

FAST FACTS: CHOP SHOP

DAILY HOURS

5-11 p.m. (restaurant),
10 a.m.-8 p.m. (butcher
shop), 11 a.m.-2 a.m. (bar),
plus lunch counter service
from 11 a.m.-5 p.m.

RESERVATIONS

Accepted by phone or on
opentable.com

LOVED IT

The house grape jam that tops the rillettes on the butcher's board channeled the very essence of my youthful dalliances with Smucker's concord grape—but with a winelike complexity that I appreciate as an adult.

LEAVE IT

The braised Brussels sprouts and kohlrabi (\$5) with guanciale (pork cheek bacon) lardons, shallots, sliced garlic and mint. While the flavors were balanced and bright, the sprouts were over-braised and mushy. While Brussels sprouts were once the scourge of children everywhere, they've been more ubiquitous around town these days than Divvy bikes. If you decide to serve them, you better rock the preparation.

DRINK YOUR MEAT

I'm not a fan of bloody marys—they often tend to skew acidic, watery or overtly tomato-y—but my date loves them. I'm glad that she forced me to take a sip of her Butcher's Bloody (\$9.15), a cocktail so savory that it reminded me of meat—and that's because the house mix is larded with chorizo puree.

SHOP TALK

New Wicker Park hybrid offers meaty picks and more

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

They say you can't be all things to all people, but Chop Shop sure is trying. This new addition to Wicker Park is a lunch counter, butcher, bar, restaurant, event space and even makes its own giardiniera.

It's also run by a trio of killer Ms. The first is co-owner Mario Minelli, whose family runs Minelli Meat & Deli, a 50-plus-year-old butcher shop in north suburban Niles; he oversees a team of butchers who cut up thick, ruddy steaks such as a NY strip (\$32) sourced from Meats by Linz in Calumet City. The second is Nick Moretti, an entrepreneur who founded a New York music and art collective called The Kor Project and plans to bring

concerts and events to 1st Ward, the 6,000-square-foot private event space inside Chop Shop. The final M is executive chef Joshua Marrelli, a vet of the short-lived but exceptional Little Italy restaurant Urban Union. And in case the "M" crew wasn't enough, there's also an "F" involved: Ty Fujimura of Arami and the original Small Bar consulted on the restaurant section of Chop Shop.

With so much at play and so many involved, I stopped in to see if there were too many cooks in the kitchen, or whether the collective of talent assembled might just be a dream team in the making.

What's with all the suits?

Located at the convergence of Bucktown and Wicker Park, the epicenter of eclecticism that is Damen, North and Milwaukee avenues, Chop Shop's clientele is certainly a reflection of the neighborhood, with a ton of tattoos, hoodies and sharp fashion on display. And yet, there was also a pretty healthy contingent of suited gents and dudes in tucked-in oxford shirts, the kind of folks you usually see filling River North's myriad steakhouses. Yeah, I've noticed that," Marrelli said. "I think it's because we've really focused on making Chop Shop approachable, a place where you can get a beer, have a date or celebrate a night out with your buddies." I should also mention that the original name of the restaurant was Chicago

Chop Shop, but The Chicago Chop House—the downtown steakhouse that has been open since 1986—alleged that it was too similar and might confuse people. I thought that was kind of absurd at first, but now that I see the clientele, there might be something to that theory.

Now on to the meat ...

Even if you're confused a bit by the name, you won't be disappointed by the house-butchered chops and steaks on offer at Chop Shop. I tried the bone-in Berkshire pork chop (\$25) topped with velvety sweet and smoky bourbon-quince butter. Though my server suggested I get the chop cooked medium, it arrived more medium-well, with the ends slightly chewy. Still, the whole of the chop was juicy and satisfying. To get my fill of beef, I looked to the Butcher's Burger (\$14), which featured prime cuts of beef (including brisket) ground in-house daily. There are so many declarations of "best" burgers in Chicago these days that

I try to be judicious in adding to the cacophony. But after sampling this thick patty bursting with minerals and just a smattering of satisfying grease on a pillowy golden bun topped with sweet charred red onion and dripping aged cheddar, I couldn't restrain myself. This is a Top 10 Chicago burger.

Don't miss the butcher's best

With the lure of steaks, chops and burgers, it's easy to overlook the signature butcher board, but that might be the best expression of Chop



Chop Shop
2033 W. North Ave.
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Off to a good start



The butcher's board at Chop Shop
KAITLYN MCQUAID FOR REDEYE PHOTOS



The First Ward Pimm's



Chop Shop's deli and butcher



The butcher case

Shop's meat acumen. On it, there's a silky pork pate, a buttery hunk of duck rillettes (similar to pate, it's meat cooked slowly in fat until it's shreddable, then it's cooled and formed into a spreadable paste) and a cup of chicken liver mousse topped with bourbon-peach gelee (the bourbon used rotates between Maker's Mark and Heaven Hill). The mousse, which features a touch of cream, tastes more like a foie gras pate than the chunky, funky chopped chicken liver pate usually served at Jewish delis, and is smoother than a Justin Timberlake album.

Who's thirsty?

Downstairs, there's an expansive bar lined with gleaming-white subway tile that turns out some excellent cocktails. Typically, Pimm's Cup cocktails are light summer sippers, a mix of lemonade or lemon-lime soda and the gin/tea-like British liqueur known as Pimm's No. 1. Chop Shop's version, called the First Ward Pimm's (\$9.15), was bulked up with an herbal, grassy shot of chartreuse, juniper-rich Bombay Sapphire gin and a fiery kick of ginger beer, transforming the drink into a more substantial foil for the fall chill. My date couldn't decide between two wines by the glass, so our server offered and brought healthy samples of each choice to help her decide. She chose an Italian red, the Coltibuono Cetamura sangiovese-canaaiolo blend (\$8), which had a lush, ripe fruit flavor and a touch of spice. I often hesitate to ask servers when I'm torn between two wines, because I expect them to pimp something the restaurant makes a killer margin on—or just choose the higher-priced glass to bump up their tab. Here, I liked that our

server demonstrated that she knows her stuff by describing the flavor profiles, but also let us make the final choice with a quick tasting.

A room with a view

At night, the hazy yellow glow of North Avenue's street lanterns mingled with the soft lights of Chop Shop's mod mini-pendant chandeliers and danced over the thick leather-tufted black booths. The dining room was warmed up not only by this light, but by bright red metal chairs. The room was quiet, and there was sort of a hushed, late-night diner kind of vibe throughout. The window views of passing Blue Line trains and a graffiti-dappled section of North Avenue added a bit of urban grittiness. While this might not sound like a particularly good view, there's something comforting and clandestine about it.

The bottom line

Chop Shop is a great stop for Bucktown and Wicker Park residents, but by committing to doing things right—cutting meat to order, grinding their own beef for burgers, making sensational charcuterie and awesome cocktails—it could quickly become a destination for the rest of the city. Though I didn't dive deeply into everything that this butcher-restaurant-bar-event space hybrid has to offer, I tried enough to see that Chop Shop seems to be making good on its attempt at serving all comers.

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The Butcher's Burger



Diners at Chop Shop