

# eat & drink

How does this glam new River West joint measure up?

Mughlai curry  
KAITLYN MCQUAID  
FOR REDEYE PHOTOS



## URBAN sprawl

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

The three-way intersection of Halsted Street and Grand and Milwaukee avenues is where you might find yourself for breezy patio dinners at Piccolo Sogno, late nights at Funky Buddha Lounge or cheap drinking at loveable dive Richard's Bar. But it's also where a cluster of buildings owned by William and Henry Dawson, fireplace mantle magnates of the early 1900s, once stood. That's where the name and inspiration comes from for a new restaurant from Billy Lawless, who owns always-abuzz gastropub The Gage and neighboring Henri on Michigan Avenue, and Branko Palikuca, owner of suburban restaurants Topaz and Amber. The Dawsons were known for their intricate and finely crafted mantles and grates; Lawless and Palikuca—who met because Palikuca was a regular at The Gage—were intrigued by the Dawsons' ingenuity, pioneering attitude and detailed craftsmanship and wanted to re-create that spirit in the form of a turn-of-the-20th century American restaurant. I stopped in to see whether they succeeded.

**The scene:** I could tell from the towering two-story front door, the glass atrium foyer and the timber-lined ceilings that a healthy investment was made to build this place. But despite all the cash that was clearly dropped, the first-floor dining room felt like a spacious, impersonal box. Though you can't see the open kitchen from one side of the room because it's blocked by a massive bar, you can smell it from every table. Wood smoke hangs heavy in the air, lending a rustic, cozy campfire feel, but it was so strong I couldn't smell my own food when it came to the table.

**The food:** A veteran of Alinea and Next (which reinvents itself with a new concept three times a year), chef Rene De Leon has plenty of experience launching brand-new menus and making sure every detail is impeccable from day one. A week after The Dawson's debut, that polish and consistency was lacking. For his **chicken-fried steak**, I loved that De Leon replaced what is usually an over-fried, well-done thin chopped steak patty with a thick New York strip (\$32) cooked medium rare, wrapped in a flaky fried batter. The mashed potatoes on this plate were velvety and the greens, which are often cooked





**The Dawson**  
730 W. Grand Ave. 312-243-8995  
Take it or leave it

until limp, had a nice crisp texture and were packed with spice. But the biscuit on the side was lukewarm, and worse, cool in the middle. A dish of wood-grilled squid (\$15) channeled paella and bouillabaisse, with tiny bits of smoky chorizo and tender chickpeas floating in a broth of saffron fumet (a light fish stock), but it was so salty that I could feel the edges of my lips drying out after a few spoonfuls. Al pastor tacos (\$6) had crispy corn shells but clumpy, dry meat. I'd definitely go back for the pickled onion rings (\$6); the tangy brined onions and the punch of the house-made barbecue sauce made the perfect match for the tempura-like breading. The best plate of the night was mughlai curry (\$17) featuring slivers of sweet roasted carrots and fruity slices of fig that stood up well to the fiery slick of curry. A garnish of papadam (Indian crackers made from lentil flour) added crunchy contrast. This was the kind of elegant and thoughtful plate that reminded me of the top-notch restaurants that De Leon has cooked at.

**The influences:** De Leon is inspired by so many things: American classics, the comfort food his mom cooked when was a kid and the dishes and techniques he learned to cook at some of the best restaurants in the world, including Noma in Denmark and El Celler de Can Roca in Spain. Instead of a crafty fusion of those influences, the menu feels like a confusion of gourmet and diner plus Latin, Southern American and Indian influences. I think if De Leon settles on more of a straight theme, say finessed American comfort food like that chicken-fried steak, he gives his kitchen a better shot at cooking consistently.

**The drinks:** I beelined for the beer list and wasn't sorry. A creamy stout from Evil Twin Brewing called Christmas Eve at a New York City Hotel Room (\$9) and Revolution Brew-



Liquid Swords

ing's Red Skull, a hoppy and caramelized imperial red ale, both stood up to the richer fried food on the menu. Cocktails created by Annemarie Sagoi (Graham Elliot, Big Star) include options such as Liquid Swords (\$10), an herbal, bitter drink that was brightened by a healthy splash of lemon and yuzu sake.

**The service:** Owner Billy Lawless has a Cheshire Cat-like smile and a gigantic presence. When he stood within a few feet of my table, it almost felt like a potbelly stove alit nearby: When he bent toward the table and asked us how everything was with his slight Irish lilt, I kinda wanted to bro-hug the dude, buy him a pint of Guinness and ask if I could hang out and watch soccer (I mean football?) with him. I held myself back. While we were waiting for dessert, he looked down and realized our table was set with soup spoons instead of dessert spoons. "Restaurateur OCD," he said after swapping them out. "It's the little things." It felt like maybe I'd been recognized and this move was staged for my benefit; if not, it was pretty brilliant attention to detail.

**Bottom line:** It's tough to put a finger on what feels off about the space, but I think what I expected from The Dawson is the puppy intimacy of Lawless's old spot, The Grafton, or at least the clubbiness and quiet of the back room at The Gage. Instead, it was just cold openness. There are some incredible, high-quality plates from De Leon, but there are just as many snafus to smooth out. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE. REDEYE@TRIBUNE.COM | @REDEYEATRINK

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