

eat & drink



PHIL DEMBINSKI PHOTO FOR REDEYE

A HOUSE FOR ALL?

SIZING UP SOHO HOUSE'S OPEN-TO-THE-PUBLIC SPOTS

In the wake of Chicago gaining its first Soho House—the West Loop outpost of the hotel and private club for creatives founded in London in 1995—earlier this month, interested locals seem to be falling into three camps. There's A) the early adopters who were invited to join and are giving their pals the hard sell to follow suit, B) the scenesters who are coveting it as the coolest new place in town and C) those who think paying \$1,000 or more a year (see sidebar) just to hang out in one building is ludicrous. Regardless of which you fall into, anyone—member or not—can explore the open-to-the-public first floor, which includes a polished pizzeria, speedy chicken joint, lounge and spa. Read on for our review of Pizza East and turn the page for our first impressions of The Allis and Chicken Shop. **LISA ARNETT**
WRITERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED; MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE. REDEYE@TRIBUNE.COM | @REDEYEATDRINK

SOHO HOUSE ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP FEES

Chicago house:
\$2,000

Ages 27 and younger:
\$1,000

All international houses:
\$2,800
 (\$1,400 for ages 27 and younger)

To join: Online applications include photos and samples of work and are reviewed by a committee. There's also a one-time registration fee of \$150-\$300.



Amenities: Bars, restaurants, 60-foot rooftop pool, gym, screening room and a boxing ring. **TRIBUNE**



OVEN FRESH

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

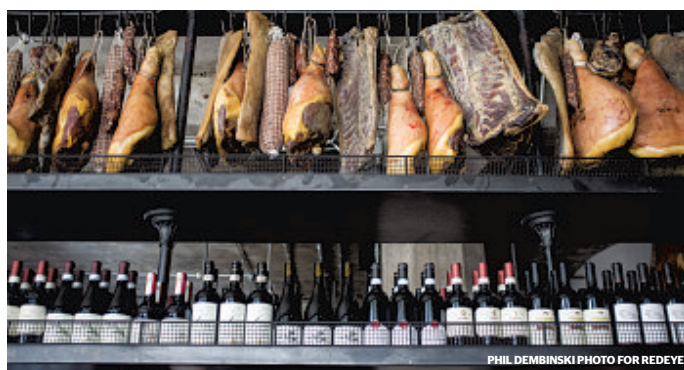
There are a lot of pizzas in Chicago, but few them are served in swank hotels that offer members-only boxing rings and film-screening rooms. But that's exactly what you get with the fourth location of Pizza East restaurant (the other three locations are in the United Kingdom) in the new Soho House hotel. While you have to be a member or a Soho House guest to hit the second-floor gym or watch a fancy French flick in the fourth-floor screening room, in theory, anyone can eat at Pizza East located on the first-floor mezzanine. I say "in theory," because on a recent weekend, I couldn't find a reservation before 10 p.m. But scarcity produces yearning, so I persisted and snagged a 9 p.m. res that popped up on opentable.com at the last minute.

The crust: Wood-fired and featuring a puffy edge dotted with bits of carbon and a crispy, golden center, this is one of the better Neapolitan-style crusts in Chicago right now. When I asked chef Kyle Boyce his secret, he said, "Everything we do is made with a little bit of love." Sure it is, chef. As it turns out, the secret is an Italian wheat flour that Boyce found through a Chicago supplier that resulted in a better, crispier crust than the German wheat flour used at Pizza East's other locations. He liked it so much, in fact, that he's rejiggering the recipe in the U.K. to use this new flour, too. As in the U.K., the Chicago dough undergoes a two-day rise; the

long fermentation allows more bubbles to form in the dough, resulting in a satisfying chewy and airy interior.

The toppings: The basic margherita pie (\$13) features a sprinkle of tomato and a handful of basil leaves on a bed of molten buffalo's milk mozzarella. Often, the mozzarella on a margherita stays confined to dense, jiggly circles that don't distribute to the rest of the pizza, but the hot ovens at Pizza East ensure that the creamy cheese oozes like lava over the whole pie. The Portobello pizza (\$13) was covered in inky black roasted mushrooms and finished with a shower of oregano and gooey, funky taleggio cheese. The pie of my dreams turned out to be a white pizza with veal meatballs, crispy prosciutto and a cream-based sauce baked into the crust (\$16). The meatballs were so moist and tender and light that I joked with my friends that they likely were held together by the tears of an Italian grandmother; Boyce said grinding the meat fresh in-house is the key to the moistness and texture.

The sauce: A bright, well-seasoned blend of crushed tomatoes added a bit of acidic pop, but didn't overwhelm any of the excellent ingredients. The cream on the veal pizza was light, with a touch of salt and pepper that complimented the spice in the meatballs.



The service: My friend was happy to see "gluten-free options available" stated on the menu, but unfortunately our server couldn't name any. To her credit, she brought one of the cooks to our table, but even he was noncommittal. Likewise, when we asked the server to recommend some meat options for a charcuterie board, she wasn't able to explain the difference between any of the six types of salumi on the menu. That's pretty sad for a restaurant with breathtaking displays of prosciutto and other cured meats hanging over the bar. ("I think we have about twenty five thousand [dollars] in meat hanging there," Boyce said.) The night ended on a weird note when the credit card machine was down and our server left us hanging out in the meanwhile. Luckily it was only for 10 minutes, but my tablemates and I joked that we might have to wash dishes since we didn't have cash on us to settle the bill.

The wine: Wine with pizza is a no-brainer, this wine list makes ordering it more confusing than necessary. The first section features by-the-glass and 17-ounce carafe selections that state a grape varietal and region, but not the wine producer or vintage. The second section has full bottles with the name of the wine producer, but no vintage years. The two sections aren't separated from one another very well, so my tablemates and I made the

mistake of ordering a carafe of the house chianti (\$45), thinking it was a full bottle. When the waitress brought the tiny carafe (17 ounces, or about two-thirds the size of a typical full 750-milliliter bottle), we thought she'd brought the wrong size until we realized our mistake. And while not everyone's a wine expert, many diners do want to know the vintage or the producer of the wine they're drinking. Though not providing those details allows a restaurant to switch vintages (and perhaps make a larger margin on their wine selections, if you ask me), they do so at the expense of customer service. If there had been a producer or vintage listed, I might have had a better shot avoiding the bitter, acidic juice passed off as chianti.

The scene: With its industrial red seats, pipe railing fixtures and warehouse-style pendant lamps, Pizza East feels a bit like a dimly lit Chipotle. Another wall lined with cans of tomatoes and bags of flour adds a touch of a Potbelly vibe. Although, there's a touch more glam over both those places found in the flickering wood-fired ovens or the white subway tiles that line the kitchen.

The bottom line: The table and wine service need some work, but Pizza East is already turning out some of the better Neapolitan-style pizza in Chicago.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR.