

eat & drink

LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE



ON THE AVENUE

How does The Gage's good-looking new neighbor measure up?

Acanto, the new restaurant from the folks behind The Gage and The Dawson, has a pretty good shot at becoming one of the best restaurants on Michigan Avenue. Then again, that's not exactly an impressive feat considering Michigan Avenue has a dearth of great independent restaurants. By my count, the "great" club includes Nomi Kitchen, The Purple Pig, Spiaggia and Acanto's sister restaurant The Gage. With little competition and an A-list owner in Billy Lawless, Acanto has the DNA to dominate the dining food desert of south Michigan Avenue. Armchair predictions mean little, however, so I stopped in recently to see if Acanto truly has the stuff to become a dominant destination or just a slightly above-average tourist trap.

Like father, like son

Acanto's executive chef Chris Gawronski was born to do this. He's the son of certified master chef Kevin Gawronski, who owned two pasta shops and is now a culinary professor in Michigan. Kevin's good friend is chef Brian Polcyn, now considered an American authority on charcuterie. They both golfed regularly with Polcyn, and Chris mined him for recipes.

Though a life of cooking seemed pre-ordained, Gawronski tried to avoid it and studied English literature at Oakland University in southeastern Michigan, where he "wasn't really that good of a student," he said. "I was a swimmer. I mostly studied swimming pool." Midway through college, he realized his real calling was cooking, a path his father discouraged because of the intense dedication involved. As a chef,

Gawronski's dad worked long and odd hours, which took him away from some of the most basic family duties. "I told [my dad] I wanted to cook, and he said, 'You're [bleep]ing crazy!'"

Let me ask you a question. Who taught you to shave? I said 'Mom.' He said, 'Exactly.'

But, Gawronski persisted, and now, his father occasionally joins him in the kitchen. "Now I get to work with my dad. It's a very personally gratifying thing. We developed recipes together for Acanto before the opening," Gawronski said.

Endless pastabilities

Pasta is the best thing at Acanto. There are five on the main menu and another one to two offerings listed on the specials chalkboard each night. They are all housemade. In most restaurants, even if the ravioli dish is

fresh, spaghetti isn't housemade, because the tubular form requires an expensive extruding machine to create perfect strands. "I told Billy we needed an extruder if we're gonna do this right," Gawronski said. "The great guy that he is, he agreed, but said the pasta better be damn good." It is. The spaghetti noodles (\$17), coated in a golden duck-egg gravy and tossed with perfectly blanched emerald green-colored rapini and tender braised bits of pork neck and shoulder, had a satisfying, springy chew. Another pasta, the black pepper rigatoni (\$17), was covered in a contrasting mix of toasted breadcrumbs and comforting silky bits of spicy braised lamb.

Chris and the beanstalk

In addition to the pastas, there's a decent selection of salads and first courses at Acanto. One of my favorites was a serpentine arranged tangy of tender octopus, crisp radish,

Acanto
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Heating up

Acanto's octopus dish
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jammy figs and fiery slivers of fresno chili bathed in a sweet-and-sour drizzle of balsamic vinegar and olive oil (\$16). The dish looked and tasted like it fell out a high-end tasting menu. Not everything's so fancy, though—I loved the humble white bean salad featuring bitter shoots of purple Treviso leaves (a milder type of radicchio), salty bits of pancetta, buttery pine nuts and sweet bursts of raisin (\$14). But Gawronski doesn't always get it right with beans. There are way too many black turtle beans (and they're underseasoned and slightly tough) in his suckling pig preparation (\$38). Luckily, the incredibly tender suckling pig—served three ways: a bit of roast loin, a slice of pork belly and an uncased sausage made from the shoulder—redeems the plate. The sausage is garlicky and juicy and demonstrates the meat prowess of a guy who's been studying charcuterie for a while.

Spirits for all

All that salty meat required a strong drink, and the list from spirits director Mike Page had quite a few nice ones. I especially dug the #3 aperitivo (\$9) featuring sweet vermouth and housemade wood-grilled orange soda; it tasted like an orange Crush ice cream float smoked over a campfire. If sweet is not your thing, the #9 cocktail (\$13), a delightfully bitter elixir featuring armagnac, amaro and cherrywood smoke (from cherry wood chips set afire by a mini-butane torch) had a leathery, woody quality that will satisfy those who like heavier cocktails.

Look out for Lawless

New York has had a long history of legendary maitre d' types, such as Oscar Tschirky of Delmonico's and the maestro Sirio Maccioni of Le Cirque, but Chicago restaurants usually have been defined by their chefs. Acanto's owner, Billy Lawless—the dude with the gargantuan presence who plays a de facto version of a maitre d'—might be the exception. At some point, he will arrive at your table with his big grin and crack a joke in his Irish lilt. He may slap you on the back or pour you a complimentary digestif. One thing he always

does, as on the night I visited, is ask if there is anything he can do or anything he can bring to make your night better.

This is a good thing, because Lawless' ovations seemed genuine and balanced out our server, whose excessive fawning just felt fake. When my friend ordered a cocktail at the beginning of the evening, the server declared it his favorite. In the middle of the meal when I ordered a completely different cocktail, that same server declared this cocktail his favorite a well. He asked how we liked every single dish we ate. He commented on the remains of each plate and the speed with which we ate them, as if he'd been watching our every bite. Don't stand so close to me.

A room to swoon over

One of the most impressive things about Henri was its dining room; at a time where even the finest chefs (see Goosefoot, Elizabeth) were opening spare, self-designed spaces in modest storefronts, Henri had all the trappings of old-school fine dining. The spacious dining room featured towering ceilings, Louis Sullivan-style molding, glass chandeliers wrapped in amber-colored drum shades and Tiffany blue walls.

At Acanto, almost none of this is lost and much is gained. The chandeliers have been replaced by mission-style glass pendants that cast a dim light against newly painted crimson walls. Hundreds of backlit wine bottles hold court next to a fireplace filled with flickering candles. Tufted red leather banquettes and burnt sienna-colored Eames-style chairs surround honey-hued wooden tables. The whole place feels less like a restaurant and more like a secret smoking lounge at a country club.

Bottom line

Acanto is a calm Italian-food serving respite from a hard-won day of surveying the Art Institute or shopping on the Magnificent Mile—and definitely one of the best restaurants on Michigan Avenue.

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