

eat & drink

Dove's Luncheonette



Jukebox hero

Dove's Luncheonette serves up Wicker Park's most stylish diner

By Michael Nagrant

FOR REDEYE

"No cross-table dancing allowed." I still don't know what that means, but it was on a sign stuck to the wall at The Lantern, a diner I used to hang out in Royal Oak, Mich. It's now closed, but the memories, the late-night nostalgia of courting a woman I loved, but who didn't quite love me as much, remain. Which is to say, in most of our lives, a special diner will loom large. It likely will be a place with mediocre coffee, cheap two-egg specials, enough chrome to

rival a '50s-era automobile and plenty of wood veneer. More importantly, it will be the gathering place for you and your friends to make mischief and grand plans, sometimes drunkenly, sometimes hungover or sometimes stone-cold sober.

Diners are important, and for a town with an art museum that owns "Nighthawks," Edward Hopper's quintessential depiction of a diner, Chicago doesn't quite have as many great diners we might need. But, when Chicago needs something, the folks behind One

Off Hospitality (responsible for some of Chicago's best restaurants from Blackbird, to Avec to The Publican) usually oblige. And sure enough, its most recent addition is Dove's Luncheonette, just steps from One

Off's other Wicker Park hangouts, Big Star and The Violet Hour. All but extinct these days, luncheonettes were counter-service restaurants, often located in department stores, that as the name suggests, served quick lunches. Dove's serves breakfast, lunch and dinner and feels like a diner more than anything else, though the menu is inspired more by Northern Mexican than American classics. I stopped in recently to see if it was the diner of my late-night fantasies or an odd diner parody.

A diner with style

With its chrome-trimmed stools, fluorescent light fixtures and a white-and-beige ceramic tile backsplash tucked behind the flat-top grill, Dove's seems like it's been settled under the Damen Blue Line for decades. But One Off's design-minded touch means it looks

more polished than say, The Diner Grill in Lakeview, from the fridges packed with a kaleidoscopic assortment of Mexican sodas to the custom-designed paper placemats depicting distressed leather or a Red Rocks mountain scene. The house tunes, say Magic Sam or Stevie Wonder, come from a record player reloaded by the counter servers. A jukebox, not yet in operation when I dined, will be loaded with 45s foraged from local vinyl shops.

The crowd was a mix of Big Star hipsterati—including a dude with the sweetest beard I've seen since Chewbacca—and older folks, some slurping pozole in non-ironic flannel. "I had a guy in his 80s tell me the torta ahogada was the best sandwich he ever had in his life," said chef de cuisine Dennis Bernard, who previously worked at Blackbird and The Publican.



Already hot
Dove's Luncheonette
 1545 N. Damen Ave.
 773-645-4060

Don't call it Tex-Mex

The fare at Dove's is billed as Norteño, which means it's inspired by the cuisine of northern Mexico near the Texas border. But don't mistake it for Tex-Mex—there are no burritos as big as your head here. There is a Flintstones-sized grilled pork chop (or chuleta de puerco, \$15) that's rubbed with annatto seed (a Mexican spice), perfumed with sour orange and juicy to its core. Served on a bed of black rice smashed with black beans and topped with fried egg, it's like a Cuban take on the classic diner ham steak.

There are some classic diner dishes, too, though they're thoughtfully tempered with fresh veggies. "I don't want the food to be a big gut bomb or so diner-esque that you feel like you're gonna die," Bernard said. The perfect example of this is the chicken-fried chicken (\$15), a play on chicken-fried steak that features a fried chicken cutlet topped with gravy. The crispy chicken smothered in velvety chorizo verde gravy is crazy rich, but snappy sweet peas, green beans and thick ribbons of caramelized onion keep it from dragging into food coma territory.

Meat dishes like the chicken and pork come with stubby steak knives that look like prison shivs. I'm pretty sure this is a courtesy; the food was so good and the proximity of my dining companions was so close that I felt well-equipped to fend them off.

Hangovers beware

If you're indulging in that time-honored diner tradition of slaying a hangover, the Vuelve a la Vida (\$14)—which means "back to life" in English—is the thing. This sundae glass is filled with bursting cherry tomatoes, rings of tender squid, hunks of dungeness crab, a fan of cilantro leaves and diced avocado marinating in orange, tomato and lime juice. It's like someone dropped a shot of ceviche into a bloody mary. In many Mexican restaurants, a concoction like this sits around in a pre-mixed bin, the seafood growing mushy and over-marinated. Not so at Dove's, where I watched a dude cut the avocados and marinate the fish to order. The pepper and potato hash (\$7) is also pretty life-affirming, made from half orbs of fried potato punctuated by tangles of shishito peppers, charred scallions, garlicky aioli and tiny crumbles of queso fresco.

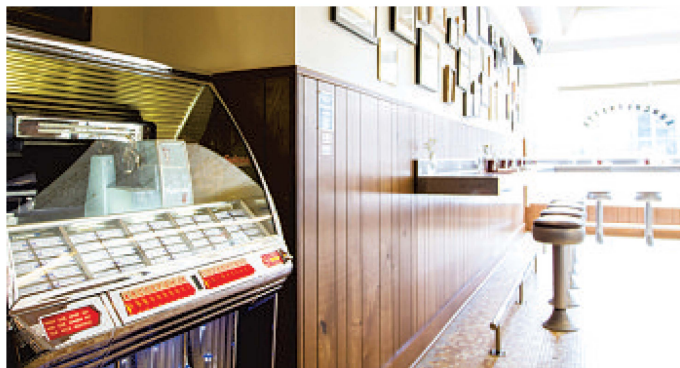
Save room for pie

And, of course, this being a diner, there is pie: peach-jalapeno, horchata and Mexican chocolate chess pies, made exclusively for Dove's by popular West Town bakery Hoosier Mama. I chose the peach jalapeno (\$6), which matched jammy, perfectly ripe peach filling with the sweet grassiness—and none of the heat—of jalapeno peppers.

Dove's may be a diner, but it's also a fine



Top: (Dishes listed clockwise from top left) Vuelve a la Vida, pepper and potato hash, roasted romanesco and betabels.
Left: The jukebox at Dove's



bar, offering a nice selection of tequila and mezcal—try a shot of the Del Maguey Chichicapa—as well as beer and cocktails. I tried the refreshing Palomino cocktail (watermelon-infused rose, grapefruit liqueur, soda and bitters, \$8), which tasted like a cube of watermelon blended into a Stiegl Radler. At a time when there seems to be an arms race on cocktail prices, it's pretty awesome that all signature cocktails here are \$9 or less.

Bringing out the big guns

Dove's is a team effort where everyone, no matter how successful, pitches in. Paul Kahan, a rockstar chef without the rockstar

attitude, worked the line and cleaned counters when I visited. His business partner, the very successful bar and restaurant vet Terry Alexander, schlepped water glasses and worked the host stand. My server was super-attentive, refilling my water glass, offering suggestions on the menu and upselling pie (as he should) by confessing his daily habit of eating slices of Hoosier Mama for breakfast.

Bottom line

Out of the gate, Dove's may be Chicago's very best diner. It certainly is the place to chow down on killer Mexican-influenced diner food. My only qualm is that it's not

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Authentaco

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Fresh-griddled tortillas and fillings from the team behind Picante

Umami Burger

1480 N. Milwaukee Ave. 773-423-2005

Saucy, souped-up burgers and fries

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open 24 hours like a proper diner (Hours are 8 a.m.-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 8 a.m.-11 p.m. Friday, 9 a.m.-11 p.m. Saturday and 9 a.m.-10 p.m. Sunday). But then again, if it were, you might forget to ever go home.

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