

# eat & drink

Fluke course at Intro



**Intro**  
 2300 N. Lincoln  
 Park West  
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Off to a good start

## Lighter than expected

What I did not anticipate was that Jacobson's menu, like him (he's a lanky NBA-friendly 6 foot 8 inches tall with a warm, funny presence in the dining room), would be lithe and refreshing. He calls his approach "rustic refined," which seemed like a nice headline for a Dwell magazine article on modern cabins, but what was it supposed to mean food-wise? As I ate, Jacobson's food reminded me of a next-level finessed vision of the kind of hippie cuisine that came out of California's Chez Panisse, a kind of modern forager's food, the kind served at Noma in Denmark and most recently at Elizabeth here in Chicago. This makes sense, since Jacobson is from California, staged (restaurant speak for interned) at Noma for a short period and recently struck up a friendship with Elizabeth chef/owner Iliana Regan as he was launching his menu at Intro.

Intro was no biblical 20-plus course Escoffier-like banquet, but rather a focused and very enjoyable five-course haiku. The entire meal took one and a half hours and I was home in time to catch up on a few episodes of DVR'ed "Girls" and some restful sleep. "Intro is how I like to eat," Lettuce Entertain You founder and chairman Rich Melman said. "I appreciated what we were doing with L2o, but I wasn't enjoying it. I don't want to sit and eat for three hours."

## From the forest and the trees

Jacobson had called on local farms such as Nichols in Marengo, Ill. and local rare ingredient procurement guru Rod Markus of Rare Tea Cellars to find things I'd never heard of, including aronia berries and mugwort. He foraged for douglas fir fronds with Iliana Regan of Elizabeth. Those refreshing minty fronds garnished a plate featuring a neon green moat of tangy sorrel and parsley sauce, which surrounded translucent scrimms of briny fluke topped with bitter, spicy radish and tiny cubes of creamy avocado. It was an explosion of balanced, clean and refreshing flavors that harkened back to some of chef Laurent Gras' early fish courses at L2o.

But, this is winter in the Midwest. Sustenance is a must, and Jacobson followed the fluke with a dark ceramic bowl of potato garnished with crispy chicken skin and lily pad-shaped mugwort leaves. Though mugwort sounds like an ingredient from Harry Potter's potions class, it's very much a forest floor herb that lent a bitter, aromatic quality to the heavier elements on the plate. Instead of mashing the potato, it was riced in to wispy curls that melted on my tongue. Because Jacobson's cuisine is so detailed and each of the elements precisely defined, there is little to hide behind—which meant a few bits of soggy chicken skin really stuck out.

# INTRODUCE YOURSELF

CJ Jacobson is first up at new rotating chef experiment Intro

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

For a lot of restaurants in Chicago, the first year in business looks like this: pre-opening hype, opening month buzz, slow fade into the background. Diners' attention spans are short and before long, they're moving on to the next hot spot. Channeling the fleeting spirit of a pop-up restaurant, Lettuce Entertain You replaced its fine-dining destination L2O in Lincoln Park with Intro, a nimble new rotating-chef experiment. The concept, menu and chef—an up-and-comer from out of town—would rotate every few months and meals would be ticketed for a given night and time. First up: a pre-fixe menu from former "Top Chef" star CJ Jacobson, aka Big Ceej.

## THE JUICE IS LOOSE

CJ Jacobson serves as executive chef for Girasol, a restaurant in Studio City, Calif. From using foraged ingredients to serving a lighter style of cuisine, he's brought a lot of West Coast influence to the Midwestern Intro restaurant experience. One of the best imports has been a non-alcoholic juice pairing (\$30) featuring custom mixes of juices from West Loop's Harvest Juicery. "Right now, it feels like if you don't drink alcohol, you get left behind at the party," Jacobson said. "I wanted to do something about that." My favorite juice of the night was a burgundy-hued beet-ginger-thyme elixir paired with the oxtail "tea" broth, rutabaga "noodles" and aronia berries course.

As for those aronia berries, they rimmed a plate of rutabaga "ramen" steeped in an oxtail "tea" poured tableside. I liked their acidity, which lifted the sweet beefy oxtail broth. Unfortunately, the server poured the oxtail broth around the edge of the bowl and not over the rutabaga noodles. At first bite, the rutabaga noodles were unseasoned and starchy—until I mixed it all together so that the salty broth seasoned everything in the bowl.

### A fine finish

The last two courses were unimpeachable. I really dug the lobster course featuring a tiny, buttery lobster's claw and medallions of tail meat covered in a bubbly buttermilk whey flanked by slivers of black trumpet mushroom and a swoosh of cumin-spiced, garlicky sauce. And then, of course, dessert.

The thing I find amusing about "Top Chef" is that every season, there's a dessert challenge that stumps the primarily savory-cooking group of chefs. It's hard to imagine that challenge stopping Jacobson, for his final course, featuring fizzy kombucha, cool juniper snow and tiny hunks of rich chocolate fudge garnished with sunflower petals, was one of the more imaginative and satisfying desserts I've had in a while. RPM Steak wine director Richard Hanauer's alcoholic beverage pairings were all very good, but none better than the 1985 Montilla-Moriles pedro ximenez sherry. The wine was thick, almost like balsamic vinegar, and had a nutty quality that paired well with the chocolate.

### Opening jitters

The risk of opening Intro in the L2O space is that, no matter how hard Lettuce Entertain You tries to separate the experiences, many people will come in saddled with the high expectations of Michelin two-starred L2O. My meal for two including one alcoholic and one non-alcoholic beverage pairing with tax and service fee was \$251.94. (Tables are booked via Tock, a ticketing system developed by Alinea and Next partner Nick Kokonas). While I dined during Intro's first week open, at these price levels, it still seemed fair to expect a similar L2O-level of service. My experience was a mixed bag, with some drink pairing snafus and utensil-clearing issues. On the flipside, I loved the fact that Jacobson spent a lot of time in the dining room delivering plates, explaining his food and talking



The lobster course



The dessert course

with diners. By the time you're reading this, I expect they'll have ironed out the kinks.

### Bottom line

The first incarnation of modern forager-inspired cuisine from CJ Jacobson is a refreshing and focused alternative to your usual four-hour stomach-busting multi-course extravaganzas. If you haven't bought tickets

yet, you should consider doing so before Jacobson moves on in a couple months. And after that, Intro seems like a great chance to get a glimpse of up-and-coming, talented chefs from out of town.

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## HEY, MR. DJ ...

Rich Melman sees Intro as an opportunity for young chefs to practice as if they're opening their own restaurants. As such, they're not only responsible for the menu, but also collaborate on things such as menu design, music and drink pairings. Chef CJ Jacobson, who once wrote music reviews for Filter magazine and worked at the college radio station at his alma mater Pepperdine, tackled the dining room soundtrack. Here's a sample of his favorite cuts, and comments on why he picked them for the nightly playlist, which ranged from Billy Joel to Sonic Youth.

### "We're Leaving" by DeVotchKa

"A great band with a truly international sound, I like how this song pushes the variety. The horns section on this track kills. This song, with its mariachi flare, was originally put on for Rich [Melman] because he loves when I cook Mexican style fare. Whenever he is in, it ends up playing."

### "That's Entertainment" by Silk Worm

"One of my favorite bands of all time ... [The] guitar work on all their stuff kills. Plus, I believe they still live here and I'd be honored if they would stop in."

### "One Piece at a Time" by Johnny Cash

This song is about a couple of GM assembly line workers who steal parts from their job and build a patchwork Cadillac over 24 years, Jacobson said. "Such a fun song. We aim to make the dinner delicious but also fun."

### "Rattled by the Rush" by Pavement

"A band very close to my heart. I love Pavement for their effortless creativity. When brainstorming, Pavement is always in the mix."