

# eat & drink

Saffron taglierini

## high society

CHEF JOSE GARCES AND COMPANY  
FIRE UP THE GRILL IN STREETERVILLE

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE



**in** Chicago, Argentine food may bring to mind the red wine hangover/meat coma that results from consuming too much BYOB malbec and skirt steak at Tango Sur. Or maybe you think of those South American churrascarias fueled by meat-wielding servers in gaucho pants (which are actually Brazilian-inspired, to be fair). “Iron Chef” alumnus Jose Garces and his chef de cuisine Cory Morris (both of Mercat a la Planxa) have launched Rural Society in the new Loews Chicago Hotel in Streeterville to disabuse you of those notions. “We want to show that Argentinian food is so much more, that you can come here and get a high-quality four-course meal with incredible ingredients, fresh off the grill,” Morris said. I stopped in recently to see if the pair would succeed in redefining the essence of Argentine food.

### Flamin’ hot

The meat isn’t all-you-can-eat at Rural Society, but it is flaming hot from a white oak-fired parrilla made by Grillworks, a company whose enthusiasts include the late, great James Beard and the very alive and awesome Alton Brown. The parrilla is kind of an open-pit barbecue with a cooking surface that can be lowered and raised by a hand-cranked flywheel for temperature control. Silvery, gleaming and spitting neon orange embers in the open kitchen, it’s like a grillmaster’s Bentley. The smoke drifting from the grill into the dining room made me feel like I was beholding a campfire while roughing it on the Argentine Pampas. Then again, the room—with thick cords of sisal rope that make up a cool faux-cathedral ceiling and

plush tufted booths stuffed with suit-wearing dudes and glammed-up ladies—felt pretty luxuriant. Gold Coast Society might have been a better name.

### The truffle life

The food keeps pace with the decor. I don’t know if I’ve seen this much expense account-quality beef and truffles since I dined at Joel Robuchon in Las Vegas a few years ago. Truffle oil lightly scents a sizzling fajita-like platter of roasted cremini and oyster mushrooms (\$12). The best use of truffle, however, was a sprinkle of shavings in the foamy whipped hollandaise that served as a dipping sauce for roasted fingerling potatoes. Those potatoes (\$10) were hand-carved with graduated ridges that made them look like Lego



Rural Society’s dining room

**REVIEW**  
**Rural Society**  
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Heating up

hills. They’d also been brushed with lard, baked in a special convection/steam oven and crisped in a broiler before service. That ridging wasn’t purely aesthetic; it added a nice textural component that sopped up a ton of the dreamy truffle-hollandaise sauce.

### Decadent dough

I’m getting ahead of myself, though. Great consideration must be given to the bread basket, which is definitely one of the finer ones I’ve had in Chicago. It included a baked yucca flour-based puff filled with cheese that was very similar to a French gougere. I could live on these alone. But there was no need for that, as the airy focaccia topped with

herbs and caramelized onion was also fantastic. The breads were accompanied by fresh chimichurri, red pepper salsa and butter whipped with malbec.

### Sea clearly

To make myself feel better about my carb binge, I ordered the carpaccio de pulpo (\$11) featuring thin slices of octopus drizzled with red wine vinegar, sun-dried tomato and crispy potato chips that had been soaked in malbec and fried. The paper-thin octopus was as tender a tentacle I’d ever had and I loved the brightening acidity of the vinegar. I kept with the seafood theme and dug in to a batch of taglierini (\$21), a long ribbon pasta similar to linguine. It was a little overcooked, but the



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**Cory Morris**

garlicky butter sauce infused with saffron and bottarga (dried, salted fish roe) and the briny sea-kissed cockles and rock shrimp tossed amidst the pasta made up for any noodle chewiness.

**Chilling and grilling**

Like those Brazilian steakhouses, Rural Society's reason for being, though, is grilled meat. Even if you didn't know it, you'd probably guess from all the black-and-white photos of prize-winning cows that adorn the restaurant's dining room. Morris told me they procure a super-tender grass-fed beef from Uruguay. I sampled an empanada (\$11) stuffed with beef belly and smoked chilis, but unfortunately, the beef was gummy and undersalted and the pastry was undercooked. Pamplona de puerco (\$28), or heritage breed pork tenderloin stuffed with poached quail egg, carrots and chimichurri, was perfectly cooked to a medium-well. Because of old trichinosis scares, people tend to freak out about pinkish pork. Yet, high-quality pork like this displays a tenderness and minerality you just won't taste if you cook it well-done. Though, once again, even with the grill-fired items, it's seafood that shined. For \$24, I scored a generous half lobster tail and a fat claw, both of which were smoky and tasted

like they were bathed in butter (the whole portion is \$48).

**Cocktail hour**

All that protein can make a guy parched. Thankfully, Rural Society has an interesting cocktail list. I especially loved the Fernet con Coca (\$10) featuring Fernet Branca, muddled cherries and Tuaca, a vanilla-orange liqueur. The bitterness of the Fernet opened up my palate and had me almost salivating for dinner, while the sweetness of Tuaca took the edge off the Fernet. Mid-meal, I ordered the Cocovino (\$8), a mix of cola, red wine and vanilla-chili sugar—sort of a play on the kalimotxo, a sounds-weird-but-tastes-good cocktail from Spain. The berry-rich fruit flavor of the malbec mixed well with the caramel in the cola and the sweet, spicy sugar softened the wine's tannins.

**Bottom line**

With killer open-fired grilled meats and seafood and unique cocktails, Rural Society likely will redefine your idea of Argentine food, not as an all-you-can-eat meat buffet, but as a nuanced melting-pot cuisine.

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