

eat & drink

Center-cut
porterhouse
steak

TO NE DOWN THE CHAR

Pricey steakhouse
Prime & Provisions could
afford to up its game

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

Prime & Provisions. It sounds like some kind of glamping retreat for investment bankers, right? With its luxury pricing and bevy of dry-aged steaks, that's not far from the truth, but it's actually the newest entry in the downtown steakhouse game from Dineamic Group. Though the founders—Luke Stoioff and David Rekhson—might be most known for creating bro-friendly bars Bull & Bear and Public House, their current strategy is to move from bars with good eats to mature, full-fledged restaurants. That brought on the opening of Italian restaurant Siena Tavern with “Top Chef” fan favorite Fabio Viviani in 2013, and now, Prime & Provisions, which opened earlier this month in the Loop.

Rather than a nouveau steakhouse with an edgy vibe, they instead committed to a revival of the full-fledged old-school Chicago steakhouse. “So many [new steakhouses] are adding 10 different types of new dishes or five different kinds of sauce. That's not who we are. We're reverting back to basics. We don't want to reinvent the wheel,” Rekhson said. “We want to celebrate the

great lineage [of steakhouses] with classics. Our menu only has about 25-30 items, what we call ‘complete cravers,’ made from better and fresher ingredients.” I stopped in to see if they achieved what they set out to do.

A dining room fit for The Donald

On the surface, they have. The entryway features a sign lined with fancy peacock feathers. The dining room is outfitted with wrought iron, massive drum pendants and a curved half barrel-shaped ceiling so fancy, it's fit to cradle Donald Trump. The place drips with elegance. Many of the booths are outfitted with tufted leather and filled with mod glasses-wearing, French-cuffed dudes and model-esque ladies. One of the booths is uniquely lined with a zebra print that only Liberace might love—it's a nod, Rekhson said, to the famed Booth One at Pump Room, once a VIP perch for Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall and the informal clubhouse of famed Sun-Times gossip columnist Irv Kupcinet. The dining room also features a lot of plate glass windows, some with a view of the Chicago River and others with a view of all the ruddy steak glory of the on-premise dry-aging room.

You've (not) been served

The service didn't rise to the elegance of the room, at least not at first. Servers wore shiny dark green vests that look less Gibson's and more high school prom, and once sat, our table waited waterless, menuless and neglected for at least 10 minutes. Rekhson told me that the focus here is on team-style service, that



**Prime &
Provisions**
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Proceed with caution

“when food is ready, it’s all hands on deck to get that sizzling steak to the table.” And it’s true, after the initial miss, at least three different servers delivered our plates during the meal. They were blazing hot and more than once we were told to be careful not to touch the plates because they were hot. I also appreciated that Rekhson made his way around the dining room to check on diners and thank them for coming.

I believe the Dineamic guys are genuinely invested and eventually will get things right. Rekhson and executive chef Anthony Fraske were gracious and understanding when I explained the shortcomings of my meal in our later interview. But in the meantime, their servers are enthusiastically recommending the heirloom tomato salad (\$14) dripping with creamy Wisconsin gorgonzola and pickled onion in the middle of May. Miraculously (considering they’re not in season until later this summer), one of those tomatoes was perfect, with a steak-like heartiness, but the other two were mealier than stale cornbread. The pickled onion was a nice touch that cut through the richness of the cheese.

Mother cluckin’ awesome fried chicken

A steakhouse’s reason for being, of course, is meat. And typically, that’s beef. But what you really want at Prime & Provisions is the fried chicken (\$12 for half portion, \$18 for full portion). The shattery crust glistened with salt crystals and was adorned with jewel-like curlicues of candied orange zest and flecks of emerald-colored rosemary. Served with a chili-infused bourbon-barrel aged maple syrup for dipping, I don’t think I’ve had better fried chicken in Chicago. I also tried the turbinado sugar-crusted heritage-breed duroc pork bacon (\$12)—the slab nearly an inch thick and as long as a baby’s arm—swimming in a pool of more bourbon maple syrup and dark chocolate. It reminded me of Vosges Haut Chocolat’s famous Mo’s Bacon Bar on steroids, but the bacon itself was a little chewy.

Burn, baby, burn

So, what of the beef? Chef Fraske raved—with the kind of intensity Blackhawks play-by-play legend Pat Foley does when Patrick Kane scores a spin-o-rama goal—about the beef here being “never ever.” That means “100-percent natural, antibiotic-free, never-ever-been-inoculated prime black angus” from Creekstone Farms in Kansas, he said. The steaks are also dry-aged for at least 35 days; my server said mine was actually 45 days old. At \$72, the 22-ounce bone-in-ribeye certainly set a record for the most I’ve ever paid for a steak. (Had I not been so protective of the RedEye expense account, there’s the option to go for a \$120 porterhouse for two.) Though I ordered the rib-eye rare, the



Fried chicken



Sugar-crusted bacon

interior varied between rare and medium rare and was riddled with a lot of fat—and I’m not talking gentle marbling, but thick, snowy-colored gelled hunks of it. I especially liked the funky blue cheese-like flavor present in

each bite as a product of the dry-aging, but I didn’t love the fact that the edges were acrid with carbon. Whatever you do at a steakhouse, the first rule is you do not burn a steak that costs the equivalent of almost nine hours of hard-won labor at Chicago’s current minimum wage rates. I asked Fraske how this might happen and he said, “We actually want to char them. We use an induction top broiler that’s super-hot. One man’s char is another man’s delight.” The gruyere-laden potatoes au gratin (\$12) were also bubbling with char that tasted like ash and covered with dry, frizzled leeks that reminded me of Redfoo’s hairstyle. Frankly, with all the burning going on, I was ready to call Taylor Kinney, aka Kelly Severide on “Chicago Fire,” to put this mother out.

A bone to pick

I moved on to seafood in hopes of a better result. Unfortunately, the dover sole (\$48) was mushy and doused in brown butter. Even though the menu described it as expertly filleted, it looked like Edward Scissorhands had butchered it and, while eating it, I encountered a handful of pin bones that I had to spit out. I washed down my resentment with a well-balanced Hemingway daiquiri (\$14) brimming with rum, lime and grapefruit

juices, and complimented my bitterness with a pitch-perfect negroni (\$14).

A happy ending

I also found a bit of a rebound in firm florets of purple cauliflower sprinkled with salty parmesan and pistachio (\$12) that had satisfying winey notes, as well as a tangy, boozy tequila-lime icebox cake (\$12)—created by Dineamic corporate pastry chef Amy Arnold—that tasted like a mashup of key lime pie and killer cheesecake.

Bottom line

With Chicago Cut Steakhouse across the river delivering pitch-perfect service and pristinely cooked splurge-worthy beef, the Prime & Provisions crew is going to have a tough time competing if they don’t up their game. Though it serves some of the best fried chicken in town and has a beautifully designed dining room, right now, Prime & Provisions is unfortunately just another slightly below-average expensive Chicago steakhouse.

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