

eat & drink

RATINGS KEY ***** DEAD UPON ARRIVAL ***** PROCEED WITH CAUTION ***** GIVE IT SOME TIME
 ***** TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT ***** OFF TO A GOOD START ***** HEATING UP ***** ALREADY HOT



LUCK OF THE IRISH

GREENRIVER BRINGS COMPLEX DRINKS, FRESH EATS TO STREETERVILLE

REVIEW
GreenRiver
 259 E. Erie, 18th floor
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 ★★★★★
 Heating up

By Michael Nagrant | REDEYE

“I can’t feel my face when I’m with you. But I love it.” So sings The Weeknd on his single “Can’t Feel My Face.” I’m still kind of confused about what’s going on there. Shouldn’t he see a doctor? Or maybe hit Tinder in search of a new girlfriend? This situation can’t be the foundation for a strong long-term relationship.

But in a way, I think I do know what he’s saying, for that lyric is an almost perfect encapsulation of how I feel about GreenRiver, the new Irish and Chicago history-inspired restaurant and bar from New York’s legendary restaurateur Danny Meyer (Union Square Cafe, Gramercy Tavern, The Modern and others. He’s kind of like the Rich Melman of New York City) located on the 18th floor of Northwestern Memorial patient pavilion in Streeterville.

Cocktails at GreenRiver

Face-numbingly great drinks

I love GreenRiver, and the reason I can’t feel my face is because I’m six drinks in at dinner and I can’t stop. The list of 32 cocktails and an additional 10 highball selections is the best in-depth cocktail menu launched in Chicago since Sable Kitchen & Bar opened. The emerald-colored, hardbound menu itself is beautiful, the kind of fancy artifact you’d expect to find in a classy old Chicago steakhouse. Drinks are organized by the base distillation ingredients of the main spirit (corn, rye, agave, etc.), and the menu is replete with backstories of the Chicago personalities that each cocktail is named after. I kind of wanted to steal the menu, curl up next to a fireplace and savor the tales of guys like notoriously corrupt alderman Michael “Hinky Dink” Kenna or the courageous fighter pilot and airport namesake Edward Henry “Butch” O’Hare.

But there was no chance of that as the

server hovered and snapped up the menu as soon as we ordered. This also brings up one of my only minor points of contention about the restaurant. Because the menu is so interesting and long, it would be wise to bring multiple copies to the table so that each diner has a chance to peruse it at his or her leisure instead of waiting 10 minutes for the first person at your table to read it before everyone else can begin to consider their orders.

The cocktail list is the result of a collaboration between Julia Momose, Aviary vet and GreenRiver’s head bartender, and Jack McGarry, owner of consulting firm The Best Bar in the World and New York’s Dead Rabbit bar. “I flew to New York and we set up a little parlor bar and Jack and I would just riff on stuff, playing dealer’s choice, like, ‘Hey, taste this. What about this ingredient?’ until we found combinations we liked,” Momose said.

After the cocktails were created, the historic Chicago characters and their stories



GreenRiver’s outdoor patio



Head bartender Julia Momose carves ice for a cocktail.

were matched up with the flavor profiles of each drink. “The Easy Eddie cocktail is named after this lawyer who was a really complex character who ... got caught up with Al Capone and was then assassinated for allegedly turning the government on to Capone’s bad dealings,” Momose said. “The cocktail has a creamy smooth bourbon backbone, a little bit of muddy green chartreuse, sweetness from bright yuzu and lemon juice and a touch of bitterness from the banana and chocolate bitters. It’s complex and multifaceted like Eddie was.”

One of Chicago’s burgeoning bartending talents

Momose is brilliant. She and her team aren’t just pouring random liquids together and hoping you’ll pay \$16 for them. They’re using sugar and sweeteners to adjust the texture of drinks. They’re hand-chipping ice. They’re using garnishes that sustain the aromatic profiles of each drink. At GreenRiver, where some cocktails run as much as \$19, you’re getting precisely what you pay for.

Every single thing I drank was brilliant, balanced and appetite-whetting. One of my favorite drinks was the Square Shooter (\$16), featuring Del Maguey Vida mezcal, aquavit, falernum, framboise liqueur and absinthe.



Saffron spaghetti

The pale-pink elixir—which had delicate top notes of raspberry, dill and coriander—finished by punching me in the gut with assertive, bitter, smoky grapefruit and vanilla endnotes.

Though the Square Shooter had a ton of ingredients, Momose’s highballs are simple,

featuring hand-chipped triangular ice cubes, a base spirit, a mixer and a spritz of lemon oil. I absolutely loved the Carpano Bianco and Japanese plum vinegar combo (\$11). It tasted like a fizzy syrup of almond, chocolate and ripe fruit. “I love the act of making a highball, where pieces of ice are chipped

slowly and make a distinct noise, where the ice cubes crackle when they’re topped with liquid,” Momose said. “The highball is very interactive. I grew up in Japan where we’d take ume or plums and pickle them with rock sugar and soju or vinegar. We’d cut that with soda or oolong or barley tea. This drink is a nod to that.”

Refined classics and prix-fixe level plates for a song

The savory vinegar notes of the highball had me salivating for executive chef Aaron Lirette’s (MK, Acadia, Celeste) menu of refined classics. Beef tartare tossed with spicy horseradish and salty capers glistened with the golden yolk of a freshly breached farm egg (\$13). Crispy rafts of sourdough were mounded with caper aioli-slathered hunks of applewood-smoked Great Lakes whitefish topped with zingy pickled radish circles and shaved celery (\$9). The tangle of chevy housemade spaghetti (\$23) covered in a custard-like sauce of saffron, wine, cream, chili threads and blended uni (sea urchin roe) was tossed with plump, briny Manila clams, and I couldn’t slurp it down fast enough.

Tiny puck-shaped scallops (\$16) nestled in a creamy puree of celery root were so deeply caramelized, they had a satisfying crunchy crust similar to a creme brulee.

The only slight food miss was a carrot soup (\$11), garnished with a tangy quenelle of creme fraiche, half orbs of caramelized Brussels sprouts, balsamic vinegar and a dash of crunchy sunflower seeds. The broth needed more salt.

A room with a view

You can certainly find food and drink of this caliber around town, but almost no place in Chicago is outfitted with such handsome honey-colored slatting, cool Danish-style wooden club chairs (the hard backs grew a little uncomfortable after two hours of sitting) and fancy swirling white marble tabletops. And as good as The Aviary or The Violet Hour is, neither of them has the breathtaking outdoor terrace of GreenRiver, which affords killer views of the Trump Tower and Wrigley Building spires.

Bottom line

GreenRiver is most certainly one of the best restaurant launches in Chicago this year. It’s also one of Chicago’s best cocktail bars. You can celebrate a special occasion with elegant offerings, like Lirette’s \$105 36-ounce Slagel Family Farms ribeye for two, or you can pop in casually with friends after work to nosh on reasonably priced oysters and small plates or to suck down a bunch of Momose’s well-crafted cocktails.

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