

eat&amp;drink

20-ounce bone-in rib steak  
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE PHOTOS

# DOES STK'S STEAK STACK UP?

THE NEW YORK  
TRANSPLANT  
ARRIVES IN  
RIVER NORTH



## REVIEW STK

9 W. Kinzie St.  
312-340-5636

★★★★★  
Proceed with  
caution

By Michael Nagrant | REDEYE

**STK**, as their website preaches, is not your daddy's steakhouse. But based on its name and extension of a vowel-challenged spelling paradigm to the menu (Li'l BRGS, anyone? That's little burgers, in case you didn't get it), it's clearly not a steakhouse for grammarians, either. Relative to Chicago's rich bounty of steakhouses, STK's selling points are a multitude of tables grouped really close together and optimized for mingling and regular late-night DJ appearances. All I could really tell before setting foot in the door was that STK was the roth location of the New York-based chain from The One Group, a purveyor of something called "lifestyle hospitality." Confused, I set out to discover what it was and, of course, answer the eternal food critic question: Did it SCK or was it AWSM?

### ISTK and the shoddily dressed

STK's website says the venue doesn't allow tank tops, swimwear or ball caps. Women are encouraged to throw on their LBDs (little black dresses) and gents to grab their blazers

and dress shoes. These rules are loosely enforced. A woman at the bar was wearing black hot pants and a plunging ribbed tank while her male friend rocked a side-cocked flat bill cap and canvas surf shoes. Maybe STK was the steakhouse for displaced beach

bums? It was still too early to tell.

The crowd was eclectic, a healthy mix of the clubbing set, over-tanned Viagra triangle denizens exploring beyond their natural Gold Coast habitat and tailored-shirt-wearing, might've-played-quarterback-in-college hunks.

Rivaling patrons for above-average handsomeness was the room, featuring a swirl of white bone finish fins, lots of glinting glass and shimmering honey-colored wood tables. It felt like an interior crafted by the Apple Inc. design team.

### A garden of delights, a rancher's finest and seafood drowned in luxury and mediocrity

Some of the food, too, is well-designed. According to corporate executive chef Aaron Taylor, 70 percent of the Chicago menu is identical to what's served at all of STK's locations. One departure exclusive

to Chicago featured mandolin-shaved Brussels sprouts tossed with apple, cranberry and cayenne- and lemon-spiked marcona almonds (\$15). The shaved sprouts reminded me of the bitter, crisp frisee you'd find in a classic Lyonnaise salad. The thin wafers of apple were bright and sweet.

A 20-ounce bone-in rib steak (\$51) was ruby-pink inside and caramelized outside to a spent coffee ground color thanks to the 800-degree heat of the kitchen's charbroiler. The result was finer than the burnt and much more expensive ribeye I had recently at Prime & Provisions. However, it was nowhere near as funky and satisfying as the 55-day dry-aged 22-ounce ribeye—one of the best steaks I've ever had—that I ate at Boeufhaus last week. The bearnaise served alongside the STK steak was so thick that I flipped over the cup, as if to pour it, and





Ginger mojito

nothing fell out. In addition to the bearnaise, which was served gratis, STK offers seven other housemade dipping sauces at \$2 each. Considering you're paying \$51 for the steak, it seems parsimonious to charge for an extra sauce, but I gave in anyway and sampled the house "STK" sauce, a cloying rusty orange dip that reminded me of Heinz 57 crossed with Open Pit barbecue sauce.

An appetizer of seared foie gras (\$21), lacquered in spiced rum and coated with a shower of gingersnap crumbs, was served with a viscously sweet orange marmalade that evoked the smell of burning leaves and hot pie, the same kind of autumnal nostalgic smack in the brain you get from a good pumpkin spice latte. The dish would have been perfect if the accompanying huckleberry pancakes weren't undercooked and raw.

Another Chicago-only dish, Lobster Rockefeller (market price—\$95 when I went), featured the meat of a 2.5-pound lobster poached in court bouillon (water, vegetables, herbs, wine and lemon) mingled with the shoulder meat of king crab. After they've cooked, the lobster and crab meat are sliced into medallions, stuffed back in the tail shell, crowned with a stack of wilted spinach and julienned leeks and glopped with a nutmeg-infused cream sauce. The unappetizing lobster shell was mottled with cooking liquid, and the whole-leaf spinach was chewy and would have been better if it had been chopped.

The parmesan truffle fries (\$9) were cut thick and, though made of potato, reminded me of the yucca fries served at Brazilian steakhouses. The saltiness of the parmesan helped a little, but they needed a bit more finishing salt. I would have preferred a thinner Belgian frite-like cut than the squarish steak fries here.

A bruised sweet corn pudding (\$9), however, dribbled down my chin. It reminded me of eating fresh sugary farm corn straight off the stalk (something you must do before you die if you haven't already).



Sweet corn pudding



Shaved Brussels sprout salad

**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

### Decadently priced red and disappointing dessert

Daddy's steakhouse would have you swimming in trophy red wine from Bordeaux and flagons of fabulous brown liquor. STK's red wine list by the glass is fairly unremarkable and includes a cabernet sauvignon (\$14) from Kevin O'Leary, aka Mr. Wonderful of ABC's "Shark Tank" fame. I'm not sure if it's good, as our server told us we should stay away because it's made from mediocre California grapes and was the worst of the three cabernets offered by the glass. Your best bet is The Prisoner, a jammy red blend. Though at \$28 a glass, it's ridiculously marked up. While I generally don't pair my steak with mojitos, our forthright server gushed about the ginger mojito (\$14), saying, "It's awesome. You can't even taste the cognac!" Of course, you shouldn't be able to taste the cognac because mojitos are made with rum. But we live in a time where as long as mint has been muddled in the glass, a mojito is made. I bit. Spiked with tart lime juice, cooling mint,

bubbly ginger ale and velvety Hennessy, the cocktail drank like a menage a trois between a moscow mule, a mojito and a dark and stormy. It was actually pretty good.

A churro milkshake (\$10), featuring dulce de leche ice cream blended with a shot of Fireball whiskey, wasn't bad, though I really wanted to taste the liquor and all I got were caramel notes from the ice cream. A silver shaker cup was filled with churro bites, but they were doughy and undercooked.

**Bottom line:** STK does not SCK, nor is it AWSM. It's just K. The modern interior is a welcome departure from the old knotty wainscoting and red leather banquettes you'd find at your daddy's steakhouse. If you're looking for an inspired scene that serves the best beef in town, you're better off spending your money at Boeufhaus.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED, AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE. REDEYE@REDEYECCHICAGO.COM | @REDEYEATDRINK

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