

winter sucks

Patty melt

\$15 at Mortar & Pestle, 3108 N. Broadway 773-857-2087

WORTH A TRIP

By **Michael Nagrant** | FOR REDEYE

They don't do diners these days, at least not like they used to. No one really opens that Edward Hopper-esque "Nighthawks" ideal, the late-night boutique trimmed with more chrome than something off the Ford assembly line in the 1950s and fueled by bottomless cups of sludgy coffee and two-egg specials.

The diner as we know it has been replaced by the hip brunch café, lined with reclaimed wood and studded with industrial metal chairs, communal tables and funky pendant lamps. Pastries are made by hand in the back, and the coffee is probably fair trade and local. There are eggs on offer, but they're not beaten with a spatula by a grizzled grill-tender; they're coddled by a group of chefs who idolize Alice Waters or once worked in four-star, prix-fixe restaurants. Baker Miller and Cellar Door Provisions, two of my favorite spots in recent memory, are fine examples of this trend.

Mortar & Pestle, a new restaurant in Lakeview, also falls into this category. While it doesn't have the same local sustainability

commitment (there's some) as Baker Miller and Cellar Door Provisions, partners Stephen Ross and Stephen Paul are serious cooks with serious experience and a like-minded commitment to "handmade well-executed food," Ross explained.

They met while opening Art Smith's Table Fifty-Two, which recently closed to make way for Smith's new concept Blue Door Kitchen & Garden. Ross started his career under Bruce Sherman at North Pond and spent time at Old Town Social and Park Hyatt Chicago; he even did a stint as an assistant winemaker at Clinton Vineyards in upstate New York.

Ross's wife is Syrian, and you'll find that influence in coriander-spiced beignets (\$5), an offering of merguez sausage (\$5) and a spicy cumin-spiked bean dish called Middle Eastern (\$11) with a side of pita. Beyond the international influence, there are also French toast and eggs plates (\$15 each), both larded with foie gras.

But the thing that really gets me at Mortar & Pestle is the old-fashioned patty melt



The patty melt with locally aged beef, caramelized onion, gruyere and a special sauce at Mortar & Pestle
KATLYN MCQUAID PHOTO FOR REDEYE

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(\$15). Though it trends a little fancy, it's still the very essence of old-school diner carbohydrate comfort. The medium-rare juicy patty, made from local beef (a heart-stopping mix of 70 percent meat to 30 percent fat), drips with funky, nutty gruyere. The beef is weighted down on the grill with a diner-style press and develops a lacy, crispy edge. The rye toast used to complete this masterpiece is golden, crackling and dripping in butter, while a topping of caramelized onions is jammy and has a hint of brown sugar. All this richness is foiled by a slightly acidic bright mayo- and ketchup-based "special sauce."

Ross calls it an ode to his childhood. I

concur. A bite of this sandwich transported me to the 8-year-old version of myself, bellied up to the gold-flecked Formica island in my childhood kitchen, where one night my mother stuffed seared American-cheese-swaddled ground chuck topped with grilled white onion confetti—all doused in ketchup—between two slices of hearty rye bread. Before that moment, I had never met a burger without an enriched white pillow bun. I wasn't sure I could ever go back after that.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED, AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.

FOOD FIGHT

This week, RedEye rounded up some of the finest culinary minds in Chicago. Aaaand now we're really hungry.



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Lettuce
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Julia Momose
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Green River

1	If there's one thing the Chicago food scene needs more of, it's the ramen-doughnut combo spot. Fried doughnut-shaped noodle cakes topped with bacon icing served in tasty beer broth.	... attention. It's so dynamic and incredible.	... NACHOS.	... fun.	... really good late-night dining opportunities.
2	IHOP is having a pancake art competition. Tell us what would carry you to victory.	Can I just enter the pancake-eating contest?	The characters from "Frozen." If my niece is judging, I'll win for sure.	Ziggy Stardust and Lemmy tribute cakes and ALL of the squeeze bottles.	Leaning Tower of Pisa—tall stack.	Life-size Jenga pancake stack.
3	What's the perfect meal to celebrate a certain hockey coach's three-year contract extension?	Quail egg quiche and quince pie (my mind went to the "Jeopardy" scene in "White Men Can't Jump," circa 1992).	The old Hat Trick as a liquid meal.	Anything as long as it doesn't stain that sweet, sweet mustache.	An ice-cold Molson.	Ramen at Takeya with an icy cold Asahi and latticed gyoza.
4	When John Boyega says the next "Star Wars" film will be "much darker," what does he mean?	Not sure. I'm still mad at Luke for hiding on a beautiful island while the rest of the galaxy is fighting over him.	I'll be falling asleep earlier in the movie.	In the same vein as "Game of Thrones"; everybody dies and don't trust your family.	It probably means they are changing the color of the Stormtroopers' armor.	More sinister.
5	Surviving Chicago winters is all about ...	I've just been eating more ice cream. Reminds me that the cold has a happy side.	... the right coat, the right scarf, the right libation and, of course, the right vacation.	... not being a soft-bodied [bleep] about the cold. It's Chicago. Boots, wool socks, base layers and booze.	... parking in a heated garage.	... warm company, good food and a bar that gets you out of the house.