

winter sucks

WINTER SUCKS  
GET OUT  
AND  
ABOUT

# Going mad

We found your new favorite  
West Loop hangout



Brussels sprouts

**MINI-REVIEW**  
**Mad Social**  
1140 W. Madison St.  
312-243-2097  
☆☆☆☆☆  
Off to a good start

By **Michael Nagrant** | FOR REDEYE

“Girls,” “Entourage,” “Sex and the City.” At their core, these shows promote the mythology that groups of very different friends—despite porn-star lovers, terrible jobs and psychiatric disorders—always stick together and make time for weekly cocktails and banter. As we watch, we too dream of meeting our friends at a bar or restaurant where everyone knows our names and we can sing karaoke versions of our favorite Kanye West songs and escape our day jobs over cosmopolitans (or perhaps shots of Malort are more appropriate).

## THE SCENE

These days, those moments are rarer for me. I spend my time looking for great food, which often means avoiding impulsive, overhyped scenes. But Mad Social, a new spot in the West Loop from Gina Stefani and her executive chef, Mariela Bolaños, doesn't make you choose. House speakers pulse with the “oonce, oonce, oonce” of electronica. A wall lined with what feels like 100 mirrors tilted at funky angles reflects a jigsaw puzzle of reclaimed wood and the buzz of diners hunkered over communal tables. Translucent stained glass panels offer shadowy views of cooks in the kitchen, and a towering Viking-like tapestry hanging near the front of the room dampens the crowd's racket.

Stefani is Italian while Bolaños is Mexican, and their backgrounds certainly influence the food. But the room feels neither Italian nor Mexican; it's more of a modernized industrial version of a medieval drinking hall. I wouldn't be surprised to see Jon Snow from “Game of Thrones” drinking here. The energy of the space is undeniable and vital.

## THE FOOD

In my experience, this type of scene tends to serve terrible wings, “truffle” fries and troughs of overpriced pico de gallo with chips. At first glance, Mad Social's menu seems like a sociopathic fusion of Mexican and Italian cuisines, overusing the restaurant name with cutesy menu items such as the

Madhattan, Mad soup, Mad burger and Mad poutine. It left me wondering why the food is so angry.

But on careful consideration, most of the menu is mad genius. The Mad soup (\$7) is like the love child of French onion and tortilla soups. A soulful chicken broth is fortified with the sweet perfume of caramelized onion and the slight fiery sweetness of toasted guajillo chilis. A nest of tortilla strips somehow stays crisp under a glorious crown of broiled chihuahua cheese dusted with smoked salt. My only issue was that though my date and I said we were sharing everything, our server only brought one spoon. While I think the soup is perfect, Bolaños—who worked at the excellent but defunct Viand Bar & Kitchen under one of my favorite chefs, Steve Chiappetti—is a serial tinkerer. She said she may soon spike it with madeira wine or sherry for a little extra oomph.

There are also crispy Brussels sprouts (\$10) on the menu. Brussels sprouts are the new kale, which is to say they're everywhere and already on their way out (they make me think of Gwyneth Paltrow, who makes me think of Goop, which ... yuck). Yet at Mad Social, they are wispy like potato chips and tossed with tiny whirls of red cabbage, shaved shallots

and earthy bits of carrot all glazed with a salty lemon-lime burst of yuzu soy vinaigrette. The result is serious crunch on crunch, the chopped salad to end all chopped salads.

The Mad burger (\$20) didn't fare as well. I ordered it medium-rare, but the patty was prepared medium-well and almost bone dry. What I did love is that the beef was properly salted, the brioche bun was custardy and the house pickles were tangy. Plus, the Cajun onion rings topping the burger were finger-licking good.

Because it has been a very long time since I've visited Olive Garden, I caved to my Italian franchise food cravings and ordered the fried calamari (\$12). The tempura-like batter was thin, light and crisp while the tomato sauce was warm and acidic. As an added bonus, fried triangles of ancho pepper are strewn about the plate, making this a fritto misto by way of Mexico.

Roasted shishito peppers (\$9) could be better. Though they were covered in a river of hollandaise and showered with shaved grana, they were undersalted, huge and chewy; our table lost interest after a few bites.

No interest was lost, however, in a waffle that was fried like a funnel cake, roasted in the oven, dusted with sugar and topped

**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



**Mariela Bolaños**



**Chicken & Waffles**

with a Milanese-style panko-coated chicken breast and a plank of crispy pork belly (\$18). If that doesn't seem like a threat to your post-New Year's health kick, a very sharp knife has been plunged into the center of the dish and a mini-flagon of maple syrup is served on the side. A housemade hot sauce with habaneros, manzano peppers and red jalapenos is also there for dipping. It's the ultimate breakfast-for-dinner feast, and you could build a very successful food truck off this dish alone.

**THE DRINKS**

No true HBO show-inspired outing would be complete without excellent libations, and despite the LOL-worthy name, the Madteani (\$14)—made with earl grey-infused gin, lavender bitters, egg white and honey syrup—drinks like a boozy iced tea of the gods. The Madhattan (\$15) is juiced up with Buffalo Trace bourbon and Carpano Antica, a sweet vermouth that tastes like Christmas, and spiked with Campari-infused ice cubes in which an excellent whiskey-soaked cherry is buried.

**THE SERVICE**

My water glass has generally runneth over this year, but the Mad Social team was so

responsive to this matter that it was like they anticipated every sip I was about to take. This might seem annoying, but I loved it. Except for a full glass of water, so I loved it. Except for not bringing two spoons with the soup, our server was attentive, chatty and had such a good command of the wine list. She guided my date to an excellent budget-friendly, fruit-forward Valtigione Barbaresco (\$10), whose strong cherry notes stood up to the rich burger.

The one weird thing is that the servers wear shoulder-slung purses as part of their uniforms. Our server said they use them to replace aprons and are able to tuck pens, napkins and odds and ends inside them. Before I asked, I felt like the staff were on their way to shop the Mag Mile.

**BOTTOM LINE**

If you're looking for a great place to host your next friend outing, Mad Social fits the bill. If you're going to a Blackhawks or Bulls game and are sick of the craft beer and middling bar food predominately served on Madison Street, Mad Social is where you want to go.

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

*jam presents*

**TONIGHT & TOMORROW!**

LEFTOVER SALMON'S  
**FUNK' BLUEGRASS BASH**  
FEBRUARY 26-27  
TWO NIGHTS OF LEFTOVER SALMON  
SLIMP/STAMPUNK TRAVELIN' MEGALURTS  
BONERAMA LOVE CARDS  
VIC THEATRE - CHICAGO, IL

**HOODIE ALLEN**  
**HAPPY CAMPER TOUR**  
SPECIAL GUESTS SUPERSTRENGTH AND BUCARINA  
TOMORROW! SATURDAY, FEB. 27  
7:00pm • All Ages  
RIVIERA THEATRE

CELEBRATING THE CATERAL DEED COLLECTIVE  
**DARK STAR**  
**ORCHESTRA**  
WINTER TOUR 2016  
NEXT THURSDAY & FRIDAY!  
MARCH 3 & 4 • VIC THEATRE  
8:00pm • 18 & Over

**Think Floyd**  
LIVE  
SATURDAY, MARCH 5 • PARK WEST  
8:00pm • 18 & Over

**DR. DOG...**  
ON TOUR  
Special Guests  
**THE DISTRICTS**  
SATURDAY, MARCH 12  
8:00pm • 18 & Over  
RIVIERA THEATRE  
93XRT

**ILIZA SHLESINGER**  
SATURDAY, APRIL 23 • VIC THEATRE  
TWO SHOWS! 7:30pm & 10pm • 18 & Over  
**ON SALE TODAY AT 10AM!**

BUY TICKETS AT **JAMUSA.COM** 1-800-514-ETIX or online at etix.com