



REVIEW
GT Prime
 707 N. Wells St.
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 ★★★★★
 Heating up

LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE

Don't call it a steakhouse

GT PRIME STUNS IN RIVER NORTH

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

There's a semi-famous painting called "The Treachery of Images" by Belgian surrealist René Magritte. It's not as well-known as the artist's painting of a man in a bowler hat with an apple in front of his face, but you've probably seen it. It's a painting of a pipe with the caption "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," or in English, "This is not a pipe."

I imagine when Magritte's buddies first saw this sly piece of work, they felt like I do when my friends proclaim Dunkin' Donuts coffee the best. Which is to say I'd like to punch them and then buy them a year's supply of

Dark Matter or Sparrow. But my friends have a point; Dunkin' Donuts coffee isn't nearly as bad as you'd imagine it to be, and as Magritte is pointing out, the painting is not a pipe. You can't stuff it with tobacco and smoke it. It's just an image.

The idea occurs to me as I think about GT Prime, the latest installment from chef Giuseppe Tentori (GT Fish and Oyster, Boka, Charlie Trotter's) and the Boka Restaurant Group. Many folks have dubbed it a "reinvention of the steakhouse." Yes, there's a \$3,000-plus bottle of red wine on the reserve menu ("I hope someday someone will order it," Tentori said) and ruddy cuts of wagyu galore. But trust me, GT Prime is not a steakhouse.

Swifter than Swift & Sons

Sister restaurant Swift & Sons, on the other hand, is a steakhouse, with its forest of wood paneling, tableside carved beef Wellington, heart-stopping creamed spinach and tufted leather sofas that probably smell like George Clooney. While Swift & Sons' cavernous interior feels like a hulking cruise ship, GT Prime is more like one of those sleek vintage wood boats, the kind James Bond is usually toting around Venice.

GT Prime's towering exterior door looks big enough to accommodate the "Harry Potter" half-giant Hagrid. Upon entering, you'll find yourself in a two-story lobby anchored by a magnificent staircase with ruby-colored steps. There are a couple of mounted heads

above the host stand that look like mythological beasts but are actually very real oryx and sable antelope, which Tentori affectionately calls Chuck and Tenderloin. There's certainly enough grandeur here to fool you into thinking you're in a steakhouse. The theme continues as you're whisked into the main dining room, where a UFO-sized crystal chandelier hangs over golden club chairs and merlot-colored velvet bench seats. The whole thing starts to feel more like a king's secret hunting lodge than a steakhouse.

In service, but not servile

Steakhouse service is often like dealing with a bad real estate agent: obese and slavish. ("Yes, ma'am, the cocktail made with Malort

and unicorn pee is also my favorite. What an excellent choice you've made.") Such behavior is generally followed by gross upsell. ("Chef recommends the corn, which features individual kernels hand-removed by 40-year-old virgins and goes for just \$100.")

At GT Prime, my server was fearless and smart. He knew what to recommend and why to recommend it and somehow figured out what everyone at the table was craving. He came off like a wise-counseling best friend of many years.

Danielle Lewis, queen of cocktails

One of my dining companions that night doesn't eat chicken, pork (bacon excluded, of course), roast beef or vegetables of any kind. He was on the fence about a cocktail called the Golden Ticket (\$13) made with mezcal, chartreuse, yellow pepper, lemon and saffron, but our server nudged him to order it. I'm so glad he did. The cocktail tasted like a Oaxacan sunset (if a Oaxacan sunset was drinkable): smoky with a bell pepper nose and sealed with an acidic citrus kiss.

Just before dessert, the server raved about the X-Ray Yankee Zulu cocktail (\$13) with bone marrow-infused bourbon, charcoal-infused Cappelletti and Punt e Mes vermouth. It was cooling with a touch of mouth-coating sweet maple flavor and bitter chocolate notes. It's coffee and cigarettes and doughnuts in a sip. Lead bartender Danielle Lewis' cocktails are some of the most exciting I've had in a long time.

Tiny meat, big flavor

Though being branded with the steakhouse label doesn't seem so bad, Tentori explained that there's a slippery slope that comes with it. "It's tough reinventing the steakhouse because people expect giant \$100 potatoes stuffed with truffles and caviar," he said. "But at the end of the day, it's still a potato."

This isn't to say that you'll find cheap, scant cuts of meat here. There was an expensive wagyu New York strip on offer the night I visited, but it was served as part of the Carnivore platter (\$110), which housed four 4-ounce cuts of meat including bison, prime beef tenderloin and rib-eye. Though it's expensive, the sticker shock is eased by the fact that the 16-ounce plate feeds four to six people. And unlike at most steakhouses, the sensibly sized portions are sliced into perfect bite-size hunks, so the only work you have to do is pop those beauties into your mouth.

The comparison offered by the platter is enlightening. It's like a wine flight in meat form. I often get into arguments with friends about whether or not a rib-eye is better than a filet or if wagyu is really worth the price. This platter settles all arguments. Side by side, the melting wagyu makes the tenderloin feel as soft as an old tennis ball. The rib-eye



X-Ray Yankee Zulu
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE

bursts with more minerality and pepperiness than the wagyu. The attention to detail on each piece of protein is staggering. Because the bison is lean and would be destroyed by the quick, searing heat of a broiler, it's wood-grilled. The wagyu and rib-eye both have a healthy bit of marbling, which allows for a crispy caramelized crust under the broiler.

The Italian (black) stallion rides again

But this is where the steakhouse ends. Befitting a native-born Italian, Tentori's pasta is rocking. Toothsome tangles of bigoli (\$16) drip with bolognese sauce loaded with super-savory beef, pork and veal and a whisper of sweet, tangy tomato. Also in the Italian vein, there are arancini puffs (\$12) stuffed with gooey parmesan risotto and mortadella swimming in a swirl of balsamic vinegar and mozzarella cheese sauce spiked with crunchy pistachio.

The menu forays into other countries as well. There's a French-style Lyonnaise (\$15)

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



Mortadella arancini
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salad featuring a forest of frisée gilded with runny duck egg yolk and slivers of salty duck prosciutto standing in for traditional pork lardons. I loved the flavors, but Lyonnaise salad is so classic that I craved and expected a crouton. There's also a crab salad dome enrobed in avocado (\$20) and garnished with red pepper sauce spikes that look like

Guy Fieri's frosted tips. The flavors were classic, but only half the avocado was salted. The unsalted parts were flat and fatiguing to chomp through.

Complexity served two sweet ways

Dessert is a bit steakhouse-like in that there's a Meyer lemon creme brulee on offer. Enticed by peach cake and a chocolate marquise (all desserts \$10), I didn't try it. The peach cake was moist, but I found the mix of peach, strawberry and floral green tea flavors a bit confusing. The chocolate marquise was gooey and decadent, a premium fudgy fantasy. Sporting banana tahini,



The Carnivore
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE

apricot sorbet and a sesame tuile, this dessert was also complex. But smart contrasting elements—bitter sesame and sweet banana, cooling apricot and warm chocolate—were delightfully executed.

Bottom line

I have the pleasure of sometimes inviting people with me to review restaurants. Afterwards, I usually get a thank you, maybe an enthusiastic head nod or, in some cases, a decided meh on the experience. After dining at GT Prime, my friends hugged me. While rare, I think those hugs speak to the fact that this is the kind of place that makes you feel alive, like you're inside the beating heart of Chicago. Ultimately, the greatest trick Boka Group ever pulled was convincing the city that GT Prime was a reinvented steakhouse. Calling it a steakhouse lowers expectations. There's no need for that. This is a success by any standard.

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