



By Michael Nigrant | FOR RED EYE

Cult films, cheap (or expensive) whiskey and punk rock can sustain a person for a very long time. For many years, Delilah's, the legendary Lincoln Park dive bar that built its reputation on purveying that exact combination, was a clubhouse of mine. But as you know, dear reader, I spend more time in restaurants than punk bars these days. But wouldn't it be wickedly delightful if I could find a restaurant with quality food and the dark, divey comforts of Delilah's? I thought I'd found just the thing at The Loyalist, one of two new restaurants from culinary power couple John Shields and Karen Urie Shields (Charlie Trotter's, Alinea). And if I needed a sign, the restaurant's website said in its very best nod to Nirvana, "Come as you are." So I did.

The dark basement lair and Nothing Noble

Just like at Delilah's, there are cult films on offer at The Loyalist, and the night I walked in, the TV over the bar was showing the movie "Heathers." There is also whiskey. A cocktail dubbed Nothing Noble (S12)

contradicts its name with bourbon, demerara sugar, Amargo-Vallet Angostura bitters (a woody spicy mix) and lemon verbena. A sip of the brew, which tasted like drinking very expensive leather in the middle of a citrus grove, made me feel like a king.

If you've ever scraped your leg on duct-

taped booths or feared the bathrooms at Delilah's, you'll appreciate The Loyalist's comfy, unblemished black banquettes and bathrooms lined with gleaming tile.

"I've always loved the idea of a Chicago bar," John Shields said. "We wanted to do a nice version of that, where maybe you drop in and the Cubs are playing on the TV, but you can also get a great bite to eat."

Stroll like Delilah's, The Loyalist's dining room is as dark as a Frank Miller-era Batman comic book. Even though the sun was out when I dined, the subterranean lair was filled with flickering candles and shadows.

Tick tock, my seat is wrong

Speaking of The Loyalist's booths, you can reserve one with three or more people at a \$20-a-head deposit (which is applied to your bill) via Tock, the ticketing system developed

by The Alinea Group's Nick Kokonas and former Google and Apple guy Brian Fitzpatrick. If you're like me and regard communal tables as you would a close encounter with a Zika virus-riddled mosquito (hey, I'm shy), you'll want to do this because all of The Loyalist's non-booth seating is shared.

Though we booked a booth in advance, we were seated at a communal table after checking in, and I sheepishly had to ask if we'd screwed up the reservation. To her credit, the hostess apologized profusely and quickly moved us to one of the coveted booths.

Downstairs vibe, upstairs eats

While dining in a dark basement feels a little Harry Potter-locked-under-the-stairs-like, the food is pretty and intricate—as you might expect from Charlie Trotter's vet John Shields and chef de cuisine Mark Bolton,

REVIEW
The Loyalist
 177 N. Ada St.
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 ★★☆☆☆
 Give it some time

LENN CHASSER/RED EYE PHOTOS

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



who spent time at Tru and Boka. I don't know what the stuff at high-end prix-fixe sister restaurant Smyth is like, but the plates here are beautifully composed.

Many of the ingredients served at The Loyalist come from top local farms including a place dubbed "The Farm" in Bourbonnais run by Rebecca and Alan Papineau. "We have zero Sysco trucks pulling up out back," John Shields trucks me.

Though it's no longer available, my favorite dish was half-moon slices of ripe Nichols Farm honeydew and cantaloupe dripped in crunchy cashew dust, dabbed with fish sauce and finished with shiso and kaffir lime powder. Salty sweet and funky the contrast of soft and crunchy textures had juice dribbling down my chin. Despite the cheffiness going on here, the dish rang up at a very reasonable \$7.

One dish that's not reasonably priced is an \$8 biscuit. Sure, it's served with spicy West Loop Salumi's miso-infused butter and house-made ramp honey, but it's a single biscuit. It's also riding the edge of dryness despite those lovely condiments and doesn't stack up to the less expensive turbinado-spiked biscuit I had at Giant a few weeks back. At the very least, when we told the server that our table of three was sharing everything, he could have warned us that the biscuit was a single serving.

Acid vacation

Tangy housemade krumm tossed with crisp roast potatoes and a runny egg dripping in



buttermilk mayonnaise (S13) made me feel better, the way fancy drunk eats do. Still, the dish was a little heavy and the kraut and buttermilk a tad tame.

Another dish that could have used a spritz of lemon or a touch of acidity was a bowl of grilled squid (S13) tossed with sungold tomatoes and Fresno chili. I enjoyed the smokiness of the squid and the sweetness of the tomatoes but wanted more pop overall. And while the circular slices of calamari were thin and delicate, the tentacles were thick, chewy and a little too big. If they'd been halved or quartered, they would have



pickled onion and cucumber brightened things up, while a downy sesame-studded bun toasted in beef fat sopped up all the drippings.

Every day is like (lemongrass) sundae

A good burger demands a solid hot fudge sundae, but John Shields decided instead to go fancy with lemon verbena- and lemongrass-infused ice cream drizzled with salted licorice syrup and pickled blueberries served on a bed of sunflower butter cookie crumble (S10). The pickled blueberry and lemon notes didn't bog me down in a sugar coma but refreshed like tart frozen yogurt.

There's also pavlova (S10), toasted meringue served with blackberry sorbet that's studded with dried sweet corn nuggets. I liked the ripeness of the sorbet and the treasure hunt-like nature of discovering hunks of crispy corn, but the chevy pavlova texture was tiring after a while.

Bottom line: The Loyalist is a chill dark bar-restaurant that offers a glimpse of the high-quality experience happening upstairs at sister spot Smyth. The seasonal Thai-flavored melon was extraordinary, and Au Cheff devotees might just find a new favorite at The Loyalist. But some of the dishes still need revisions with a dash of acid or honing of textures to make this place truly top-notch.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A RED EYE CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS' RESTAURANT VISITS ARE UNANNOUNCED, AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY RED EYE.