

# eat & drink

★★★★  
**ELSKE**  
 1350 W. Randolph St.  
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Anna Posey

David Posey

# Danish touch

Elske dazzles in the West Loop

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

**If** you've ever dated someone who uses really good-smelling shampoo, you've probably found yourself leaning in to catch a whiff. Or maybe it wasn't shampoo, but a cologne or a scent on a T-shirt or the lingering tang of lip balm after a kiss. The point is, you're kind of intoxicated or haunted by that scent depending on your experience with its wearer. I had the same reaction to the first dish I tried at Elske, a new West Loop restaurant from husband-and-wife duo David (Blackbird) and Anna Posey (The Publican).

## The seduction

The dish in question featured crispy roast maitake mushrooms (\$17) and shaved raw chestnuts swimming in a pear cream that's poured tableside. The pear cream was sweet, fruity and redolent with spicy ginger and winey shallot. Like some kind of pheromonic bat signal, it had me sniffing deep within the earthenware bowl while dipping my fork in for a taste. Not only did the cream give off

a heady aroma, but it provided a bright and light acidity that complemented the rich earthy mushroom. Though it's a vegan dish, it mesmerized me just as much as any piece of perfectly seared A5 wagyu ever has.

This dish, however, was actually the third thing that captivated me on my visit to Elske. I dropped by on the day of Chicago's first baby polar vortex, when temps plunged below zero. The icy blue neon "Elske" sign in



Whole roasted maitake mushroom

the window acted like a beacon in the night on what is still a fairly lonely and dark part of the Randolph Street strip.

Once I walked past the neon sign and into the courtyard on the side of the restaurant,

I spotted a fire blazing in a huge hearth surrounded by several chairs. When I first heard the name of the restaurant, I thought it sounded like the name of a badass heroine Jessica Alba might play in some kind of post-





Celeriac risotto

apocalyptic adventure movie. (Elske is actually the Danish word for love.) The “Game of Thrones”-worthy blaze didn’t disavow me of this notion. Like me, almost everyone who walked into or out of the restaurant was drawn to warm themselves by the fire. Some even took selfies.

### Danish modern

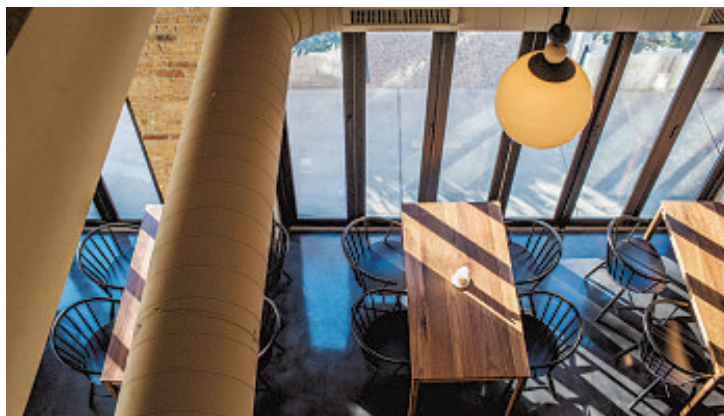
Once inside, the blaze flickered against the plate-glass windows of the dining room, mirroring the glow of real candles on the tables. I mention the candles because lately restaurants have been turning to fake flickering LEDs, which I find as romantic as the glow of a bug zapper. Bravo to the Elske crew for keeping it real.

The dining room looks like a catalog set for Room & Board. Handsome light-colored wood tables featuring exposed grain are flanked by black half-moon-shaped spindle-back chairs. The walls are dotted with sconces, but are otherwise clean and free of art. Because there was very little to look at, I spent a lot of time focused on the bro at the table next to me wearing a blazer over his Cubs T-shirt and the dude at the table next to him wearing a cashmere turtleneck tucked into his jeans. While I didn’t quite understand their sartorial choices, I appreciated their good taste in food.

### Hygge, it’s what’s for dinner

You’ve probably noticed I’ve mentioned the word Danish a few times already: David Posey’s mother is from Denmark, and the Poseys got engaged in Copenhagen. Denmark has a special place in their hearts for good reason. While the food isn’t particularly Nordic, Elske is inspired by a concept called *hygge*, the Danish obsession with creating cozy and hospitable environments, among other ideas.

The roaring fireplace and clean dining



room felt like the very essence of *hygge*. So did our server, who was very welcoming and knowledgeable. She guided my wife to an excellent cocktail by declaring the Collins (\$12) one of her favorites. A mix of Cardamaro, Topo Chico mineral water, rosemary and grapefruit juice, the cocktail was dreamed up by Elske general manager and former Violet Hour bartender Kyle Davidson. The refreshing brew was spicy, piney and full of bright citrus, simultaneously evoking a beach vacation and a touch of Christmas.

Unlike the hospitality and aesthetic, Elske’s food and drink aren’t especially Danish. But the Poseys are putting out smart, clean dishes grounded in natural techniques and earthy ingredients including puffed cereals, mushrooms and root vegetables that remind me of the plates I’ve seen coming out of the kitchen of Denmark’s most famous restaurant, Noma. On a local level, the composed natural beauty I found at Elske reminds me of the stuff I see Curtis Duffy putting out at Grace.

Like Duffy, the Poseys have a way with vegetables. Almost as awesome as the maitake mushroom dish is a bowl of celeriac “risotto”



Collins cocktail

(\$18). The humble root vegetable is diced to look like tiny grains of rice and glistens with hazelnut and sherry-flavored cream. The final product is more toothsome and satisfying than the most al dente rice. My only quibble: There’s a generous shaving of black truffle on top of the whole thing, but the tame truffles didn’t impart as much heady funk as I would have liked.

### Beyond vegetables

Not everything is vegan or vegetarian. A bed of soft scrambled eggs (\$18) swaddled silky chicken confit slivers and chewy smoky carrots, which have concentrated in sweetness and flavor after spending days warming over Elske’s oven. A thin shiny omelet dome enrobed the whole thing. The contrast of the custard-thick omelet and fluffy scramble underneath was delightful. Ironically, the graceful dish was inspired by “some [bleep]ty leftover eggs at my mom’s house, where the eggs had hardened on the bottom, but the top was still a soft scramble,” David Posey said. “After that, I got this idea for an egg-like crepe over scrambled eggs that became this dish.”

The only savory dish I had some trouble with was grilled coppa (\$22) with sunchoke and quince. The edges of the pork were cooked well-done and bursting with hay and mineral-like flavors, but the rare center was super fatty and chewy. The sunchoke puree on top was a touch gloppy, and I found that there were too many soft textures in the dish.

### Daring dessert

Textural contrasts were strong in Anna Posey’s desserts. A rye bread pudding (\$12) featured crispy puffed amaranth, sorghum and rice that were as addictive as popcorn. An accompanying quince sorbet was surrounded by a tiny moat of quince vinegar, which offered a smart sharp acidic contrast to the richness of the pudding. While I would buy the sorbet by the pint at the grocery, I struggled a bit with the baby food-like pudding puree.

Another dessert featured mica-like sheets of praline (\$12)—which ate like sweet and slightly bitter potato chips—and swooshes of black currant jelly and a velvet-smooth parsnip cream. The dish evoked peanut butter and jelly vibes, but the black currant was incredibly tangy and the cream was mild. The dish needed a touch more sugar to offset the mouth-puckering black currant.

Though dessert wasn’t perfect, it was daring and thoughtful and a great antidote to the ubiquitous and forgettable lava cakes and creme brulees that seem to be making a comeback on dessert menus these days.

**Bottom line:** Anna and David Posey are putting out inspired natural and beautiful food. If you liked their work at The Publican and Blackbird, you’ll love the Danish-tinged evolution they’re putting forth at their own spot. If it hadn’t missed my deadline, Elske would have made my best restaurants of 2016 list.

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