



Lamb scottadito

MY FAIR LADY

ELLA ELLI IS A SEXY SPACE THAT DEMANDS ATTENTION

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

4 Star Restaurant Group (Dunlay's, Smoke Daddy, Crosby's Kitchen, Tuco & Blondie, Frasca, The Windsor, Remington's, D.O.C. Wine Bar) always seemed like an aspirational name. They purvey solid American neighborhood fare like roast chicken, BBQ and burgers, but I've never seen 4 Star as a gourmet destination restaurant group. If I was going to see a flick at the Music Box, I'd stop in at Crosby's Kitchen for the tasty chicken and biscuits, but I wouldn't make an appointment just to dine. Their newest spot, Ella Elli, seems poised to change that notion.

Helming the kitchen is Nolan Narut, a Culinary Institute of America grad and veteran of high-end hotels like The James, as well as a former consulting partner with Hogsalt (Au Cheval, Gilt Bar, Bavette's, etc.) at the Waldorf Astoria Chicago.

"I loved working in hotels, but I wanted to get back in the kitchen and just make good food," Narut said. "I also don't miss having to answer 250 emails a day."

I could tell Ella Elli was different the moment I walked in. Normally I make reservations for the places I cover. But, I reasoned, Ella Elli was only a few weeks old, Narut wasn't a household name and the restaurant was located in Lakeview off a side street. I doubted many people had heard of it, so I figured I'd just walk in. That was a huge mistake.

At 7 p.m., the place was packed and the bar was lined two people deep. The lounge area—outfitted with couches, a homey library-worthy curio cabinet and a roaring fireplace—was also stuffed. The hostess told me they might be able to seat me by 9:15.

I ordered up a Singapore Sling (Tanqueray gin, Cherry Heering liqueur, Benedictine, lime and soda) and decided to drink the wait away. The sweet and sour cocktail was bubbly and refreshing. It lasted just long enough for me to contemplate a pair of cozy, cavern-like banquettes stuffed with what looked like a couple of bachelorette



parties. According to Narut, the name of the restaurant is composed of two feminine names because the owners hoped to create a place where women would want to dine out together. I don't know how much the name had to do with it, but almost half the tables were exclusively filled with ladies.

The handsome décor also included three huge globe lanterns that looked like giant disco balls. There were copper panels on one wall and curvy, vase-like pendant lamps over some of the high-top tables. Ella Elli's marble bar was flanked with a couple of gray suede couch-like seats. They were so comfortable that I felt like I was ready to binge watch HBO instead of chowing down on a multi-course meal. The overall interior design scheme felt like '70s cool crossed with a little Nate Berkus-chic.

The menu, too, was kind of throwback. Narut isn't exploring single-origin cuisine from some obscure Asian city, and there wasn't a shingle of pork belly to be had. His influences were focused on the Middle East, France and Italy.

Admittedly, in its current ubiquity, avocado toast is pretty much the new pork belly. But most avocado toasts are layered with pseudo-healthy stuff like pickled fish or bland radishes. Narut's crispy bark of sourdough had a velvety slather of avocado, a poached egg with a warm golden runny yolk and a garlicky sesame and poppy studded-everything seasoning.

A Skittles-colored assortment of baby carrots glistening with tangy lemon vinaigrette was spiked with fiery harissa chili and dollops of cooling crème fraîche. The carrots, which were from California, had a mineral-rich characteristic that reminded me freshly plucked spring vegetables are right around the corner here in Chicago. Narut said that his cooks only do a light scrub of the carrots, because much of the earthy flavor comes from the fine skin when left unpeeled.

The comfort provided by the avocado

toast was usurped by a bowl of ricotta gnocchi so tender, I worried that if I exhaled too hard the pasta would be rendered into a fine dust. The gnocchi was redolent with truffle and mushroom perfume. I had one minor issue in that I felt like the finger-length gnocchi could have been sliced into shorter segments so that each forkful yielded a better carb-to-fungi ratio. This, however, was easily accomplished with my own fork.

Curls of shaved fennel draped over creamy scallops crowned with fruity, spicy guajillo chili butter tufts. The scallops were surrounded by a moat of tangy, buttery polenta that tasted of freshly picked corn.

There was also a dish called lamb scottadito, Italian for burned fingers, which is a nod to the fact that the lamb chops should be so warm that'll you'll burn your fingers if you don't eat them fast enough. Unfortunately, one of the Ella Elli cooks took this too literally and burned the heck out of one of my chops, imparting an acrid bitter flavor to the dish. But the other chops were rare and quite tasty when pulled through the spicy yogurt moat beneath them.

I finished up with a lemon pound cake so moist it wept lemon and tarragon syrup. I dug the complexity of the bitter-sweet floral mix of anise and citrus. But a dollop of unsweetened whipped cream, which tasted like flat old milk, went untouched.

Bottom line

Ella Elli is a step up from the usual neighborhood family-friendly American fare 4 Star Restaurant Group has built their empire on. Chef Nolan Narut is putting out some destination-worthy plates in a sexy space built for a special night out.

Michael Nagrant is a RedEye freelancer. Reporters visit restaurants unannounced and meals are paid for by RedEye.

REVIEW Ella Elli

1349 W. Cornelia Ave.
773-935-3552

★★



Chicago welcomes back Taste of Iceland for the second time April 20-23. The annual, four-day festival highlights the best of Icelandic culture, showcasing the Nordic nation's cuisine, cocktails, music, art, and film.

CUISINE | ICELANDIC MENU at BAPTISTE & BOTTLE

Icelandic chef Viktor Örn Andrésón will fly to Chicago to collaborate with American executive chef James Lintelmann at Baptiste & Bottle. The two chefs will prepare a delicious four-course prix fixe menu for the event. Brennivín's 2015 cocktail champion, Kári Sigurðsson, will also collaborate with Baptiste & Bottle mixologist, Michael Fawthrop, to create unique cocktails featuring Iceland's favorite vodka, Reyka Vodka, and aquavit, Brennivín.

BAPTISTE & BOTTLE | 101 E ERIE ST | APRIL 20-23 | FRI & SAT 5:30-10 PM, SUN-THURS 5:30-9:30 PM

DRINKS | HAPPY HOUR at SPORTSMAN'S CLUB

Join mixologist Kári Sigurðsson for Brennivín inspired cocktails and beer pairings.

SPORTSMAN'S CLUB | 948 WESTERN AVE | APRIL 21 | 5-7 PM

ART | ICELANDIC ART at CHICAGO ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION HOTEL

Join Björg Stefánsdóttir, director of the Icelandic Art Center, for a discussion on Icelandic visual arts. Björg will offer insight into how Iceland (with a population of 340,000) is able to sustain a thriving contemporary art scene.

CHICAGO ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION HOTEL | 12 S MICHIGAN AVE | APRIL 22 | 2 PM

MUSIC | REYKJAVIK CALLING at CHOP SHOP / 1ST WARD

The Reykjavik Calling concert will take over Chop Shop / 1st Ward on April 22 in partnership with CIMMFest. Spend the evening with two of Iceland's most talented bands Fufanu and Mammút as they play alongside local act OHMME!

CHOP SHOP / 1ST WARD | 2033 W NORTH AVE | APRIL 22 | DOORS: 7 PM | SHOW: 8 PM | 18+

FILM | SHORFISH at THE LOGAN THEATRE

The Icelandic film industry's premier festival, Stockfish, is screening its short film program, including Shortfish 2016 winner "Like it's up to you" from director Brynhildur Þórarinsdóttir.

LOGAN THEATRE | 2646 N MILWAUKEE AVE | APRIL 23 | 4 PM

WWW.ICELANDNATURALLY.COM
#TASTEOFICELAND

