

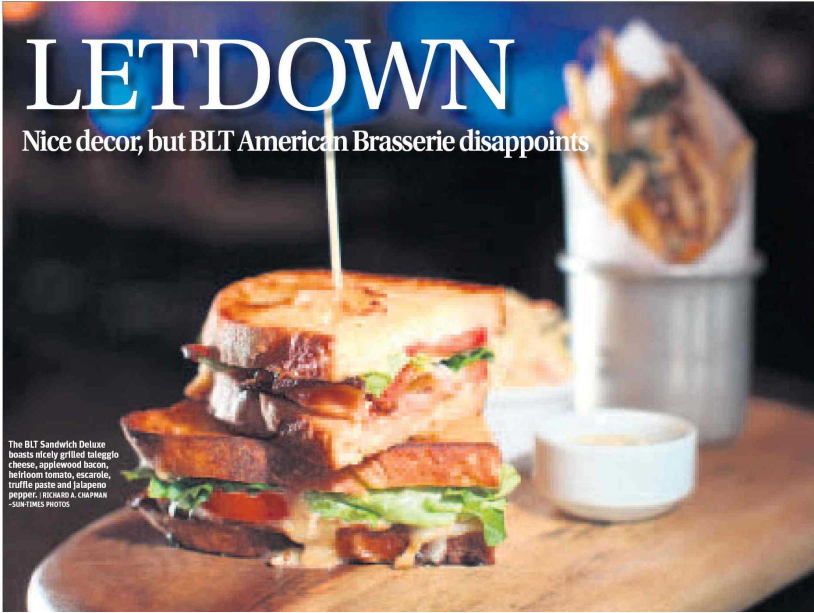


diningout

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LETDOWN Nice decor, but BLT American Brasserie disappoints

The BLT Sandwich Deluxe boasts nicely grilled taleggio cheese, applewood bacon, heirloom tomato, escarole, truffle paste and jalapeno pepper. **VICKIHO A. SHARMA** SUN-TIMES PHOTOS



The only misstep in the wonderfully flavorful hickory-smoked barbecue baby back ribs is the sweet honey-apple glaze that renders the skin a bit soggy. The ribs are served with coleslaw, cornbread and shoestring potatoes.

It's a thin line between a nondescript riblet-slinging chain restaurant (The Applebee's and BLT American Brasserie, a new River North restaurant from international super-chef Laurent Tourondel. BLT falls on the right side of that line, but only barely.)

If BLT has any clear advantage over Applebee's, it's in the decor. While Applebee's is claustrophobic and all about rustic, knotty woods, BLT is a soaring deep palace outfitted with a boordillo-worth of red velvet and what seems like enough glossy wallpapering to build a pirate ship fleet for Carnival Cruise line. A silver embossed relief over the bar featuring horses and a flying shirtless dude flying around a compass rose is Michelangeloesque, at least in its grand ambition, and ultimately redeems the space. That is until you recognize that the direction of north on that compass rose points directly east toward Lake Michigan.

This is not a metaphor. It is exactly the kind of detail that BLT, especially its servers and cooks, miss all the time. BLT is the kind of place where my wife orders a cocktail and is instead brought a soda. Though they do bring my apple and bourbon fizz, featuring Maker's Mark bourbon, apple and lemon juice and ginger ale, its otherwise bright flavors are muted by bitter cinnamon that fakes off a party ozonized apple garnish.

BLT is also the kind of place where a busboy watches me accidentally knock a knife off the table with my elbow and never offers up a clean replacement. It is the kind of place that starts with a service of gratis black pepper and guylene popovers, which, the server proudly declares "fantous." I have never heard of them. But, maybe that's because they are dried husks of crust featuring burnt cheese and a gummy interior.

Even if they were perfect, one wonders what a British Yorkshire pudding-like treat stuffed with French cheese doing in an "American" brasserie? This is my greatest problem with BLT: like Applebee's it has absolutely no culinary point of view. It's unclear whether this is just an honest miss, which seems impossible considering Tourondel is an international super chef. Or whether it's a French culinary aristocrat's stereotypical assumption that American equals "international" or deep-fried.

BLT has an Asian calamari salad (the only thing Asian about it is the unseasoned, soggy tempura batter on the squid), Italian pork and veal meatballs (fairly moist, but nothing to write home to Nona about) and a French Dip, which is American, not French. BLT even inescapably serves up a full complement of Japanese maki rolls. Whatever the explanation for this anomaly, the coconut-macadamia shrimp roll's buttery nuts, spicy cilantro and sweet shrimp harmonize well.

But like the calamari salad, most things at BLT that vaguely trade on the idea of Asian exoticism, in-



The sweet coconut-macadamia shrimp roll is peppered with buttery nuts and spicy cilantro.

cluding a soy and honey-glazed flaky cod that wafts a slightly fishy scent, fall flat.

I skipped the French Dip in favor of the BLT Sandwich Deluxe. Featuring thick planks of crisp Applewood smoked bacon, heirloom tomato, stinky dripping taleggio cheese, funky truffle paste and spicy jalapeno, it's like a grilled cheese made sweet love to a BLT in a Perigord meadow of truffles. Then again, the tomato has little flavor, and it need to be that a chef like Tourondel wouldn't be caught dead serving one in February.

BLT also has ribs on the menu. Score another for BLT in this regard, for their hickory-smoked baby backs features a deeply pink smoke ring that goes all the way to the bone. The smoke is so intense that the sweetness of the honey-apple glaze is just right and not cloying, though the

glaze unfortunately makes the ribs a bit soggy. Had these ribs featured a uniformly crispy bark, Snoops in Old Irving Park might have had to start watching their back.

One thing I can recommend without major reservation is BLT's passion fruit crepe soufflé. Though, as a free-form, half-moon served dripping in passion fruit sauce served on an ungarished plate, it channels more of a flabby diner omelette than a soufflé. But, looks aside, it's a perfect fluffly custard bursting with tropical notes, the kind of original pastry a chain restaurant would be too afraid to serve.

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The passion fruit crepe soufflé at BLT American Brasserie is the perfect dessert. A free-form, half-moon "pocket" is filled with fluffly custard bursting with tropical notes.

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