



BLVD restaurant.

# Glitz and glamour

**AT BLVD, YOU'LL FIND APPROACHABLE FINE DINING IN A SOPHISTICATED SETTING**

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

Not so long ago, the West Loop was known as one of America's most notorious skid rows. Madison Street west of the Kennedy was a maleficent mile of burlesques, flop houses and sleazy taverns. I moved to the neighborhood in 2003 into a building that held an annual progressive Christmas party called The Taste of Skid Row. That building, the Green Street Lofts, was one of the first buildings converted to condos west of the Kennedy, and the name of party commemorated the experiences of early tenants, when, as one longtime resident told me, "There was nothing around except drug dealers and homeless dudes standing around trash can fires."

This was back before Stephanie Izard brought her flock of "goat" restaurants to pasture on Randolph Street, and heck, even before that unmistakable beacon of true gentrification, Starbucks, had landed. There certainly was no gleaming citadel of a Target, as there is now.

Back then on Fulton, actual meatpackers, not the glossy magazine-friendly Publi-

can Quality Meats butchers, hosed down the sidewalks in front of their abattoirs. In 2007, under the Lake Street "L" tracks near the corner of Green and Lake streets, someone got shot in front of Chromium night club.

Chromium, after the fallout of that murder, closed and lay dormant for years, until a few years ago when husband and wife

Frank and Kara Callero and their partner Steve Zaleski acquired the space and transformed it into the recently opened BLVD restaurant.

Karen Herold's design features gleaming chandeliers, a tsunami wave-shaped towering central staircase, art deco paneling, custom banquettes and custom-built tables. It's probably the most magnificent restaurant interior I've seen in years. In fact, when I think of similar amazing restaurant designs, like GT Prime or the now closed Embeya, I realize her studio also designed them.

"We wanted to create experiences for people. We wanted to do that by channeling 1950s Hollywood, the lounges on Sunset Boulevard," said Kara Callero. "That was when people went out to dine for more than just a meal. The experience was about more than food. It was about the atmosphere, the drama, and people-watch-

ing. We wanted to recreate that, but in a contemporized way."

BLVD's dining room looks like a set piece for one of those Charlize Theron Dior television commercials. There's a glitz, glamour and even a touch of fantasy that transforms you when you're dining here.

Servers are nattily attired in well-cut purple suits, which look like some kind of collaboration between former Vogue editor at large Andre Leon Talley and the dearly departed Prince.

As I surveyed the room and its sharply adorned attendants, I thought:

*Maybe fine dining isn't dead.*

If you have a beautiful room and servers in luxuriant finery, you run the risk of intimidating or projecting haughtiness, a few of the reasons that fine dining is dying. The trick of BLVD is that while the room feels like a show, it is not showy. Though

the servers dress with a Savile Row fleekness, they're also very approachable.

However, fine dining is also about serving great food. The original menu at BLVD was conceived by Pump Room vet Ross Mendoza. Current executive chef Johnny Besch has not reconfigured the menu, but having worked with Michelin-starred darlings like Laurent Gras at L20 and demigod Alain Ducasse, Besch brought a detailed level of refinement to many of the existing dishes.

One great example is a bowl of roast summer corn, charred scallion, crab and parmesan (\$18). I've had similar dishes and they eat like a dry succotash or maybe slightly refined street elotes. Besch has added in thick nubs of king crab and lays down a base of silky corn pudding, which provides a cohesive richness and velvety finish. Cacio e pepe (\$16) features a creamy swaddle of chewy house-made noodles bathed in Parmesan bursting with black pepper. It's so good, I kind of go full Cookie Monster—only lifting my head once the plate has been cleaned—my chin and Cheshire Cat grin dripping in remnants of noodle bits.

Tournedos Rossini (\$62), a dish thought to be invented by another French legend, Escoffier, is so classic, it's basically extinct. Besch revives it well. Hunks of ruby-red rare filet mignon wearing caps of black truffle and a drizzle of heart-stopping demi-glace, poured tableside, perch on custardy beds of brioche. My only issue is the truffles in this preparation have a slight whiff of funk, but not the intoxicating earthy perfume of a winter truffle from Perigord. Also, truffles should be shaved so they melt on your tongue, and these are thick like scalloped potatoes and are a chore to chew.

I order a glass of red to go with the filet, and ask about a California red blend called The Cleaver (\$17), one, because I've never heard of it, and, two, there is a sort of ironic symmetry in drinking a wine named after the butcher's tool that likely hacked the cut of beef I'm consuming. I appreciate that my server describes the varietal make-up of the wine and tells me that it's medium-bodied, but she doesn't lead with the important fact that it's super sweet. The opening sip is like gulping melted cherry Slurpee. While I don't like that particular glass, the list is a creative and interesting one. An Albert Bichot sparkling cremant de Bourgogne (\$16) is toasty and creamy.

Jiggly scallops (\$28), briny, and perfectly rare at the center are complemented by a white corn soufflé, making this sort of a scallop version of shrimps and grits. Tender popcorn shoots and bacon jam add salt and sweetness, but I still longed for a little acidity to cut through the richness.

Not everything is an artery threatener at BLVD. Pale pink scrimps of raw Hamachi (\$16) glisten with bright plum sauce and pop with the sharp tang of pickled onion.



Filet mignon Tournedos Rossini with foie gras, truffles and brioche.



Hamachi with plum sauce, fresh plums and pickled red onion.

But, then again, the brandade croquettes (\$12), fried savory doughnuts swimming in bonito and kombu-infused remoulade, likely mitigate any good you're doing to your body with lightly cured seafood. I loved the smoky umami quality of the remoulade, but the heat of the doughnuts and the plate underneath warmed it up by the time it reached our table. Warm aioli, unfortunately, conjures Miracle Whip left out too long on a picnic table in July, and that is decidedly not my thing. Besch might drizzle the remoulade on top to avoid the heat transfer from the plate.

What I especially appreciate about the entire meal is that everything is seasoned perfectly. Even at the best restaurants, there is almost always one dish that needs salt or has too much salt. I mention this to Besch, telling him I understand a head chef can't season every dish and he must rely on his team. Besch laughed and said, "That's exactly what I'm doing right now. I garnish and season every single dish that comes across the pass." Young chefs, take note!

Besch oversees dessert as well as the

savory offerings. If you've ever seen the panic the dessert challenge induces in savory cooks on TV's "Top Chef," you know this could be an epic disaster.

Malted milkshakes (\$7) are crowned with a stick of house-made toffee that has a deep caramel butteriness and a honeycomb-like lightness. I could eat a bag or two. Besch told me he does this most days before service. It's his kryptonite. The milkshakes are served in tiny vintage milk bottles in a mini-crate channeling the way your great grandma probably received her daily dairy delivery. We asked for them to be "boozy" (\$5 upcharge), but when the shakes arrived, they were not spiked. Our server adjusted the charge on our bill and apologized for the oversight.

Speaking of milk, tiny bottles of ice cold moo juice adorned with paper straws comes free, and as an accompanying surprise, with the chocolate peanut butter cake (\$13). Our server warned us the cake was big, but unless you're at a steakhouse, a declaration like that is usually a tease. At BLVD, it's an understatement. It's not so much a slice as it is a quarter of a whole cake. 50 Cent once rhymed, "I love you like a fat kid love cake." Well, I'm a fat kid,



Cacio e pepe.



Dayboat scallops with white corn soufflé.

and I love this cake. I kinda want to marry its moist chocolatey layers and gooey peanut butter ganache binder.

A yuzu-lime curd (\$11) tart featuring coconut shortbread and garnishes of tiny meringue islands was refreshing and tropical, though an overwhelming butter flavor muted the citrus flavor in the curd. But, look at me, indulging in first-world problems complaining about too much butter. I should really be telling you about the raspberry ginger sorbet, which wafted the essence of a berry patch.

#### The bottom line

The partnership group behind BLVD is called Sancerre Hospitality. Sancerre is the perfect wine to order when you're about to chow down—the mineral base and the acidity of a good Sancerre stimulates the taste buds and makes your mouth water. BLVD is Sancerre's first restaurant, and because it's such a fine entry, like a good Sancerre, it makes me yearn for any new restaurants that may follow.

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

#### REVIEW

BLVD

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★★★ (out of four)