



diningout

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OOH LALA!

Bavette's Bar & Boeuf an exquisite experience

You will say that four-star restaurants must be paved in black truffles and lined with microfiber-swaddled, handcrafted chairs. That they must be run by dictatorial artistes pimping 30-course, prix-fixe menus and their monocle-wearing sommelier henchmen who hand sell wine tastings of Alsatian Riesling and beer made by a cloister of nuns. You would be wrong.

Bavette's Bar & Boeuf, the new Brendan Sodikoff (Gilt Bar, Maude's, Doughnut Vault, Au Cheval) restaurant located in River North in the shadow of the Merchandise Mart, is none of these things, and yet it is exquisite, one of the very best restaurants to open in Chicago in a while. In what is now a restaurant world of casual dress and shared plates, Bavette's is the capital. You may find more intricate food, better decor, more attentive service or a deeper

wine list, but you will rarely find all of these things in balance as you do at Bavette's.

When I arrive, the maitre d' seats me in a cold, cramped, brick vestibule for a couple of minutes while a hostess "checks on my table." I buck at this temporary holding pen. When she finally opens the door to the high-ceilinged, soft-glowing dining room, the flux capacitor flashes, the time machine shudders, and my real life, for a few moments, is left out in the cold on the curb of Kinzie Street.

Many have called Bavette's a steakhouse. That conjures martini-swilling Mad Men blowing expense accounts on their way to the nearest gentleman's club. And there may be some of those folks here, but Bavette's is not only for the suits but the polyester-panted, too. In its Windsor-knotted and smartly vested bartenders, burnished wainscoting, sanguine, tufted-leather

elevated booths, wedding cake-style crystal chandeliers, there is a warm, universally appealing elegance. If Bavette's must be something, it is a debauchorous period piece, something vaguely '20s or '30s, of the era where the gramophone gave way to the phonograph. The soundtrack here is not be-bop, not swing, but rather a haunting early jazz with a sprinkle of Edith Piaf. The feel is partly French (zinc bar, hand-stenciled, brasserie-style mirrors) and partly American (scuffed wood flooring, a vintage, lighted, metal sign hanging near the back). And though I do not care about such things, I find it amusing that much of the food served at the relatively unfussy Bavette's is done so on rosette-painted Haviland-Limoges china, the old Michelin three-star, gold standard of plates.

As for the debauchery, it is found in the gargantuan portions, the lipid-larded comes-



The elaborate lobster cocktail is a dramatic starter and affordable, too, at \$58 at the highly satisfying Bavette's Bar & Boeuf, 218 W. Kinzie. | TOM CRUZE-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

tibles to come.

It starts with a Bavette's Punch, a dram of spicy rum muddled with the almond perfume of maraschino liquor and the bracing kiss of grapefruit. It is warming, refreshing, and I could drink a cut-crystal bowl of the stuff all by myself.

And I would if I did not have to make room for the contents of a gigantic silver bowl filled with crushed ice and a tower-

ing lobster carapace and its constituent parts: split tails, cracked claws, spiny claws and arms akimbo. Though there is a gravy boat filled with butter for dipping (aioli and cocktail sauce are also furnished), the flesh is inherently buttery and sweet and needs little adornment. At \$58, this plate is fairly affordable. However, if you've recently won the lottery, you might want to try the \$165 grand shellfish

tower, a magnificent selection of King Crab, oysters and lobster.

The foie gras terrine is encased in a half-inch of glorious fat. Breach this golden blanket of butter, and the duck liver wafts honeyed tones of cognac and a wave of cinnamon and ginger. The accompanying raspberry jam is sticky, intensely sweet and syrupy, like the very best pie filling. The terrine is served with Bavette's huge

boules of mahogany-crustured sourdough, which feature the chewiest crumb. The bread's rusticity and acidity reminds why such loaves, and not their current wan-crustured flavorless descendants, were the cornerstone of a great bread basket.

I try to lighten things up with the smoked whitefish Caesar salad, but that would be to ignore the fact that the creamy drizzle of dressing is larded with

egg and a pound of Parmesan. The flaky whitefish, tossed amid icy-cold shards of crisp romaine and crunchy fried slivers of potato, is a nice antidote to ubiquitous desiccated hunks of the usual chicken breast.

If I've given up any carbs in ordering the salad, they are won back in a plate of short rib stroganoff, a nest of al dente hand-cut fettuccine that swaddles melting hunks of braised



The chocolate cream pie is a velvety smooth, mood-lifting dessert.

BAVETTE'S BAR & BOEUF ★★★★★

218 W. Kinzie, (312) 624-8154
www.bavetteschicago.com

Hours: 5-11 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 5 p.m.-midnight Friday-Saturday; 5-10 p.m. Sunday.

Prices: Appetizers and sides, \$6-\$165; entrees and steaks, \$16-\$50.

Try: Lobster cocktail, whitefish Caesar salad, short rib stroganoff, chocolate cream pie.

In a bite: An elegant fusion of the very best of America and France. Bavette's flows with whiskey and fills you up with magnificent towers of seafood, heart-stopping steaks, noodles and silky chocolate pie.

KEY: ★★★★★ Extraordinary; ★★★★★ Excellent; ★★★★★ Very Good; ★ Good; Zero stars: Poor

short rib. Tossed in to this tasty maelstrom are earthy caramelized cremini and tiny ribbons of chopped chives.

As for the namesake "boeuf," there is plenty, including dry-aged ribeye and flat-iron steak. Ribeye, especially bone-in, is



Whitefish adds a welcome twist to the Caesar salad served at Bavette's Bar & Boeuf.



Shortrib stroganoff is just one of many assorted meat-centric offerings.

usually my favorite cut, but because of the fabulous bounty of non-steak options, I opt for the petite duchess-cut filet mignon. There's a marvelous grassy mineral tone in each bite that I desire. The jigger of dripping tarragon-flecked bearnaise sauce doesn't hurt matters.

But Bavette's is more than just ruddy cuts of cow. The Au Cheval hashbrowns and their lacy crunch also make an appearance here. Creamed spinach is elevated with the tang of blue cheese. Roast tomatoes are intensely fruity. Fried chicken is juicy to the bone, although the crust is slightly over-breaded. Bits of skin flake over the table when you take a bite, but this is no problem. Really if there's any disappointment with the chicken, it's because I've had the

good fortune to sample the natural cracklin' crust of the fried chicken served at Au Cheval.

I order Black Maple Hill bourbon for dessert, and in the only mistake of the night, the waitress brings a glass of Johnnie Walker Black. But, she also implores me to order the chocolate cream pie, saying it will change my life. I've heard that before, but this pie is so velvety, so smooth, so rich with a texture somewhere between mousse and ganache, that something in me has changed, if only my mood, which is now stratospherically delightful.

Michael Nagrant is a local freelance writer. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.