



All on Board

A carefully crafted wine program is only part of the charm of The Boarding House.

| By Michael Nigrant |
| Photography by Anthony Tablier |

The turn toward casual value-laden restaurants has been great for the paycheck-challenged and those of us who prefer jeans to suits. But there have been casualties. Lower check averages mean less money for owners and thus certain priorities are shelved. Dedicated pastry chefs are often cut, as are maître d's and sommeliers.

The good news is this trend has driven one of Chicago's best wine minds, master sommelier and former *Check, Please!* host Alpana Singh, to forge a new

path with a place of her own, The Boarding House in River North, along with business partners John Ward and Matt Fisher of Bistronomic.

Singh, a veteran of Everest and Lettuce Entertain You, is a first-class bon vivant, but her indulgence in the finer things is not entitled. She's one of the most charming, humble people you'll ever meet. Plus, she knows what's important. Which at wine-focused The Boarding House means not skimping on a sommelier. Helming up the wine program here is the talented Dan Pilkey, formerly of Ria and Balsan.

Singh makes no little plans and has created not a restaurant, but an ambitious four-level dining carnival. There's the stunning 9,000-plus-wine-glass-studded chandelier in the ground-floor wine bar and a 3,000-plus-green-glass-wine-bottle-adorned one in the upstairs dining room. There's also CONTINUED...



GRAPE NUTS From left: The wine bottle chandelier in the upstairs dining room at The Boarding House; a double bone-in pork chop with grits

The Boarding House

720 N. Wells St.,
312.280.0720

Open for dinner nightly

Small plates \$9-\$13
Seafood platters \$14-\$85
Medium plates \$11-\$16
Large plates, plates for sharing \$22-\$85
Dessert \$8-\$9

Tyranny of Choice

Alpana Singh had full freedom to create the wine list. Her eyes and palate were bigger than The Boarding House's storage area. She initially created a list of 1,200 bottles, but had to whittle it down to 500.

Party Hearty

The Boarding House was once, as its name suggests, a place for travelers to rest. It housed a tobacconist, a cheesemonger, a saloon and a grocery. It was also Cairo nightclub, one of Jerry Kleiner's first projects. Singh says many of her customers at The Boarding House have been telling tales of '80s debauchery in Cairo's famed "catacombs," which now serve as the cellar lounge.

...CONTINUED a romantic tufted-leather, banquette-filled cellar lounge.

The street-level wine bar is filled with marble and blue-velvet settees, tall tables for enjoying food from the bar menu and a 35-seat bar. Thanks to Singh's acumen, the wine list is filled with extraordinary blanc de blanc sparklers from Gaston Chiquet and Salon, the granddaddy of all bubbly.

The menu in the bar is different from that in the dining room. You must not miss the pizza larded with rich pork belly, smoky grilled scallion and a sweet tangy burst of green apple. That pizza, and the pork tots, melting shards of milk-braised pork encased in fried mashed potatoes, ensure you have no choice but to visit at least twice. For those looking for a casual experience, this area of The Boarding House, filled with a younger crowd grabbing some pre-club nosh and a high-quality pour, is first-come, first-served.

Though if you want to make a night of drinking and lounging, or you're looking for a spot to close down the night, you don't have to go far. Head downstairs to the cellar lounge where there's a great selection of first-growth Bordeaux and other trophy wines, as well as comfortable leather seating and a fully stocked bar.

Upstairs in the two-level dining room, soaring ceilings and towering arched windows make you feel as though you're eating in a cathedral. Aquamarine-colored framed art pops against a red brick wall and plays well against similarly colored velvet draperies.

While the decor is unimpeachable, the food has its challenges. Chef Christian Gosselin (Bistronomic) was trained in the traditional French brigade system and knows his way around classic, rich, wine-friendly foods. His "Chicken Three Ways for Two" is one of the best poultry platters in town, with its golden-brown cracklin'-crumbed fried chicken, silky braised thighs and roulade of chicken breast filled with dried fruit and earthy giblet-larded stuffing. His Veal Pojarsky, a croquette of veal stuffed with breadcrumbs and egg, is basically the juiciest



A GLASS ACT Clockwise from top left: Berkshire pork belly with mushroom purée; jamón serrano with braised radicchio and smoked ricotta; sour lemon cheesecake; the wine glass chandelier in the ground floor bar area

ultimate meatloaf you'll ever have.

Gosselin has a tougher time with lobster poutine (a medium-sized plate; dishes are divided on the menu as "small," "medium" and "large"). It seems appealing, but the golden fried spuds are cut a bit too thickly and are a bit too soggy (even the ones not doused in gravy and cheese). Though, I would be happy to take home a quart of the gravy, which is peppery and deeply beefy.

A plate of smoked ricotta tossed with bitter braised radicchio and delightfully salty skeins of jamón serrano and showered with a hail of toasted hazelnuts is a well-executed original idea. The crispy cumin cauliflower (a small plate), however, is slightly soggy, too. The dipping sauces also need a touch more salt.

A classic, comforting Bavarian sausage, tender and flavored well with apple-braised cabbage, fried egg and a sharp mustard sabayon, needs a crispy component. I imagine the hope was

the sausage casing would serve this purpose, but it's not quite snappy enough.

But the meal ends well: For desserts, Singh has hired a dedicated pastry chef, Julia Fitting, whose sugar pie has an incredibly buttery crust and an addictive candied pecan crumble topping.

Because of Singh's background, you'd expect the strongest part of the dining room would be the wine program. The wines by the glass, from a slightly sweet Dönnhoff riesling to a juicy sparkling rosé from Umberto Bortolotti, are tasty and offer good value.

But, the service of these wines needs some tuning. When my wife asks our waiter to describe two sparkling wines, he says, "One is a rosé and the other is a prosecco, which is not as sweet as a typical prosecco." This is not particularly helpful unless you know these varietals. Pilkey had not been hired at the time of my visits.

Singh has been very successful. She didn't need to open a restaurant. Doing so was a big risk, but also sort of unavoidable for a person who lives for challenges. I am inspired by how she keeps pushing. She's definitely created a destination drinking experience with good, if sometimes inconsistent, food. I suspect she'll make the tweaks necessary to improve things until The Boarding House is an unimpeachable restaurant destination on all fronts. ■