

FOOD DRINK | REVIEW



BOARD ROOM Clockwise from left: The chalkboard wine list; Pacific Reef fish with spicy tomato sauce and Niçoise olives; manicotti stuffed with lamb

New Kid on the Block

Think Taylor Street only offers traditional Italian food? Think again.

| By Michael Nagrant | Photography by Anthony Tahlier |

The name Urban Union conjures either a hip marriage ceremony or a grungy city college meeting hall filled with pool tables and fast food joints. But, it is neither of those things. Rather, it's a new restaurant on Taylor Street that is the very best example of a bistro.

It is a bistro not so much in the French tradition, but in the general idea of a warm and reasonably priced convivial spot to slurp an oyster, share a small plate or two with friends and hoist a glass of something in celebration that you are lucky to be alive.

It is a 65-seat groto of exposed brick, flickering candles, dusty specials-laden chalkboards, knotty wood tables and scuffed industrial gunmetal colored chairs. On second thought, it is indeed a great name, a true urban union, a great place in a great city to meet others.

If Urban Union is a bistro of any nationality, it is as they used to say in the late '90s, New American. But

that too was a misleading name. New American was an imprecise phrase meant to convey cuisine rooted in all kinds of ethnicity and technique. In the melting pot sense, that's really, as it always has been, purely just American. There's nothing new about it.

You might argue that because you've probably never heard of him, Urban Union's chef/owner Michael Shrader is new, but that, too, is not true. A veteran executive chef of N9NE and Epic, he's been responsible for running one of Chicago's best steakhouses and also one of its hottest new restaurants. I didn't expect much from Epic, billed as a sort of nouveau steakhouse, when I ate there a few years ago, but Shrader blew me away with, yes, a luscious hunk of rib-eye, but also ridiculous sweetbreads and killer scallops.

At Urban Union, he is continuing to blow me away. There's the manicotti, a staple of dowdy Italian grandmothers everywhere. Here, CONTINUED...

Urban Union

1421 W. Taylor St.
312.929.4302
urbanunionchicago.com

Dinner Mon.-Thu. 5-10PM,
Fri. & Sat. 5PM-midnight

Raw bar \$1-\$110

Pasta \$8-\$9

Salad and vegetable

shared plates \$5-\$9

Meat and seafood

small plates \$9-\$15

Desserts \$5-\$7

What To Eat

Seafood platter, foie gras, manicotti and Copy Kat dessert

Grape Nut

Chef/owner Michael Shrader is also in charge of the wine list, which includes a rotating selection of six on tap and some 30 by the glass.

Chalk Talk

Not only is Shrader a good cook, but a funny dude. The chalkboard near his kitchen has the phrase "Eat more meat. It'll make you feel better."

Burn, Baby, Burn

Shrader's wood-burning oven adds a sultry smokiness to everything from baked oysters to golden caramelized fennel.

Fir Sure

Communal tables are made from rustic Douglas fir and the 10-seat "chef's" table is a recycled 80-year-old welder's table.

...CONTINUED Shrader sexes it up by stuffing it with luscious pieces of tender lamb, a thick red lacquer of tomato sauce and gooey bubbling ricotta.

There's foie gras, a luxury staple so cliché I'm ashamed at how often I order it. And yet, Shrader poaches his in duck fat. In case you don't know, that's duck-fattened liver cooked in duck fat, which is pretty much like deep-frying butter in butter, which is to say, awesome! But, this dish is not just a mere testosterone-fueled exercise in excess. Medjool dates and a golden drizzle of sweet sauternes wine sauce mingle on the plate. A bite of the foie coated in the stuff bursts with orange essence and hints of buttered popcorn.

But, I should probably take a step back to discuss something Shrader has little to do with, that is, unless he's also a fisherman. Urban Union has excellent towering seafood platters filled with diamond-like glinting crushed ice crystals larded with creamy heads-on shrimp, luscious lobster tail and the briniest sea-kissed oysters. The oysters are so well seasoned I'm certain they've been salted by the kitchen. But my waiter insists it's just the natural *jus* in the shell. Then again, Shrader's responsible for the housemade cocktail sauce served on the side, which gets some kick from grated horseradish. I guess he's got his hand in everything.

But that's fine, for Shrader is the Allstate Insurance of chefs: Dine with him and you're in good hands. Dishes like tender bits of cider-braised rabbit tumbled with winery mushrooms and sweet pearl onions cradle you in comfort.

Not everything at Urban Union is perfect. The menu is handwritten and descriptions of the dishes are clumped together in what seems like a crazy, rambling, unending paragraph written by a serial killer with good penmanship. The soft-shell crab teeters on the brink of being a little fishy, and a dish of huge, but tender, white beans tossed with charred octopus has too many beans and not enough octopus. It's not just me. My food runner looks at the remains of the plate and says,



KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL
Clockwise from top left: The four-seat counter offers up-close views of the open kitchen; pouring one of the six wines on tap; the Campfire Delight dessert with marshmallow and chocolate-covered graham crackers

"Yeah, we probably need to cut down on the beans."

But, I appreciate that. It means they're paying attention. They just need to make the adjustment. Certainly our server was engaged when they did the staff wine tasting. I ask him to describe the difference between two sparkling wines on the Urban Union wine list and he whips a tiny Moleskine black book out of his shoulder-slung man purse (for real, plus he was wearing white linen pants—very Don Johnson) and reads me a novella of tasting notes. I like grapefruit and so I seize on the Fournier Cremant de Bourgogne, which indeed has a ribbon of bright citrus that complements the oysters well.

Maybe the coolest thing about Urban Union is the eclectic, buzzing crowd. Low-key spots like this are usually a bastion for foodies and neighborhood locals. But on this particular Friday night, there are also plenty of killer dresses and well-suited dudes who look like they might play for a Chicago sports team. I'm guessing Shrader's successful stint at Epic has brought some of the Hubbard Street regulars south.

There's definitely a buzz.

Of course maybe that's just the murmur of folks clamoring over Urban Union's pastry chef Mitsu Nozaki (formerly at Boka and before that Tribute). The praise is well deserved, for her Copy Kat, an airy hazelnut mousse cake dripping with sweet and salty candied hazelnuts, while a riff on the Kit Kat candy bar, is way better. I wish Nestlé would find a way to stuff it in to that familiar orange wrapper so I could stock the pantry with it. Her grapefruit tart, though, is missing a big sweet note to offset the bitterness of the filling. But, even in its failure, it displays an admirable courage to skip the usual lemon curd in favor of something more interesting. ■

