

FOOD DRINK | REVIEW



WALK THIS WAY Clockwise from left: The glass walkway leading into the restaurant; the Delmonico steak; the wine room; and an homage to Michael Jordan



Michael Jordan's Steak House

★★½
505 N. Michigan Ave.,
312.321.8823,
michaeljordanssteakhouse.com

What the stars mean:
★ fair, some noteworthy qualities
★★ good, above average
★★★ very good, well above norm
★★★★ excellent, among the area's best
★★★★★ world-class, extraordinary in every detail

Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service.

Jump Ball

Basketball legend Michael Jordan scores points at his Michigan Avenue steakhouse.

| By Michael Nagrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier |

I love Michael Jordan, but I do not like him. I acknowledge that he's the greatest to step on a basketball court. But, I also grew up in Detroit. He ruined my basketball hopes during the 1990s by defeating my beloved Pistons again and again. He was so competitive that when he was inducted into the NBA Hall of Fame, a night he was acknowledged as the greatest player of all time, he took the opportunity to trash-talk pretty much everyone who'd ever slighted him.

That all being said, when Jordan and his business partners announced they were opening a Michael Jordan's Steak House in the InterContinental hotel on Chicago's Magnificent Mile, I wondered, had he saved one of his greatest acts of contempt for last?

While we may be lauded as the deep-dish pizza and salad hot dog capital of the world, with Gibsons, Gene & Georgetti, Morton's and upstarts like Chicago Cut

in our arsenal, Chicago also has a legitimate claim as the supreme steakhouse city in America, too. We need another temple of meat like the Kennedy Expressway needs more cars during rush hour.

Unfortunately, bumper-to-bumper cars on the Kennedy at 5PM are something we just have to accept, and, well, Jordan, he's never been one to back down from a challenge. And that's why I find myself walking into his new restaurant across a bridge made of glass, past a gorgeously backlit wine cellar and into a gold-silk-draped room filled with red velvet banquettes and leather chairs.

The room is nice, but it feels a little too cozy. There's no majestic skyscraper and river view as at Chicago Cut. There's no grand high ceiling or modern elegance as at Mastro's. And there are definitely no wiseguys (at least not on my visits) or wainscoting as old as my grandfather like at Gene & Georgetti. The ceilings CONTINUED...

WHAT TO WEAR

Jeans and a nice blazer for the gents and a cute shiny dress for the ladies

WHAT TO ORDER

The garlic bread, 45-day dry-aged Delmonico and butterscotch *panna cotta*

WHAT TO KNOW

Lunch is a nice, less crowded, laid-back affair.

WHO GOES

Tourists and Michael Jordan worshippers

WHAT IT COSTS

Appetizers, \$7-\$19; entrées, \$14-\$52; desserts, \$9-\$14



I'm usually a bone-in guy, but this is one of the best cuts I've had at any steakhouse anywhere. Bonus points go out to our waiter for having the kitchen pre-slice the cut so our table can share in the spoils.

...CONTINUED at MJ Steak House are relatively low for my 5-foot-11-inch stature. I can only imagine how claustrophobic the 6-foot-6-inch Jordan feels.

Maybe that's why he is dining in the lounge right now below me. That's right, Jordan is downstairs in the back of the bar holding court with some friends wearing a ball cap pulled low over his brow (didn't his mom tell him he should take his hat off in a restaurant?). I know this because our waiter kindly tips us off.

Despite my hard-line stance on the man's ego, Jordan was clutch like no other. I am struck with the grown man's version of Bieber Fever and run down the steps and gawk like a teenager. I can't see what he is eating, but I sure hope he started with the crispy garlic bread served with a gravy boat full of Wisconsin Ader Käse Reserve blue cheese fondue. It is richer than a gathering of early Facebook investors. This is the kind of food that shouldn't work unless you've had a lot to drink. And yet, the acid and pungency from the blue cheese cuts through the garlic butter in a delightful way. I don't want to eat garlic bread in any other form ever.

On the other hand I will probably never eat the "chopped" salad filled with 23 ingredients (a nod to Jordan's jersey number) again. It is well dressed and full



MOST VALUABLE PLAYERS Clockwise from top left: The main dining room; shrimp and grits; garlic bread; and Monk's Daiquiris

of tiny plump shrimp, but also rife with a confusing cacophony of ingredients, 19 of which, including a monotony of chickpeas, can probably be omitted.

I assume the "MJ Prime Delmonico Steak," a 16-ounce hunk of meat dry-aged for 45 days and paired with a balsamic vinegar jus, is also a gimmick. Usually, the acid and enzyme breakdown on an aged steak creates a funk that perilously toes the line between rot and foodie-nirvana (and often it's not the nirvana side that wins). The MJ version is intensely beefy with a mineral tang, but also cleaner and lighter than similarly mature steaks I've had. I'm usually a bone-in guy, but this is one of the best cuts I've had at any steakhouse anywhere. Bonus points go to our waiter for having the kitchen pre-slice the cut so our table can share in the spoils.

The Delmonico is one of the few classic steakhouse dishes succeeding at MJ's. The lobster bisque is lukewarm and is missing the classic bright sherry back note. The "Colossal" crab cake is colossal in size, but featuring funky, past-its-prime meat, it is also colossal in its failure to be tasty. Thank the lord, though, for the killer french fries dusted in a sweet barbecue-rub-like spice mix served on the side.

But, then again, you can get these dishes anywhere. What I really love about MJ's is that like Jackie Shen at Chicago Cut, Executive Chef James O'Donnell gives us something other than creamed spinach to chew on. His boneless crispy fried chicken perched on a waffle bathed in bourbon-pecan butter and maple-black pepper syrup is a sweet and savory "slap yo mamma" silly-good riff on the Southern classic.

Those other steakhouses also don't have the consulting services of master mixologist Peter Vestinos (formerly of Sepia), nor his beautiful, bright Monk's Daiquiri filled with aged rum, lime, grapefruit and an interesting bitter herbal Yellow Chartreuse note.

And they don't have the velvety smooth butterscotch *panna cotta* (more of a *pât de crème*) boozed up with a shot of 15-year-old scotch and sprinkled with sea salt, served with a side of Garrett's caramel and cheese corn. They do generally have chocolate cakes, though none of them are 23 layers like this one. But the cake is average and the micro-thin layers are also gimmicky.

In the end, I like Michael Jordan's Steak House, but in the pantheon of steakhouses, right now it is no Michael Jordan. It is instead more of a Tim Hardaway, a contemporary of Jordan's, one of the best point guards to play the game, a guy with one of the best crossover dribbles, but also a dude who most non-hardcore basketball fans don't remember much about.

There is a quote in the dining room from Jordan that says, "I was aware of my success, but I just never stopped trying to get better." If Jordan can apply this philosophy to his restaurant, eliminate the fluff and focus on tweaking the food, the steakhouse still has a real shot at the top. ■