

FOOD DRINK | REVIEW



# Hotel Sweet

Avenues may be no more, but The Lobby makes a visit to The Peninsula a must.

| By Michael Nigrant |

| Photography by Anthony Tablier |

I have loved hotel lobbies for many reasons: drinking, shopping and, most of all, people-watching. Dining, however, was never one of those things. But, thanks to a recent dinner at The Lobby restaurant at The Peninsula Hotel, lobby dining now has a special place in my heart.

It wasn't always that way. I've always enjoyed the weekend all-you-can-eat dessert bar at The Peninsula where you can stuff yourself on gold-leaf-wrapped chocolate bars, sundaes and pastries, and drown yourself in luxuriant hot chocolate. But dining-wise I've always seen The Lobby as an afternoon tea destination. (Truth be told, I preferred to get my real meals at The Peninsula's Avenues, which under chefs Graham Elliot Bowles and later Curtis Duffy had been one of the best restaurants in Chicago, if not internationally, for the last decade.)

When Duffy left, The Peninsula took its time finding a replacement, eventually hiring Lee Wolen (formerly sous chef at Eleven Madison Park in New



**MUSIC TO OUR EARS**  
Clockwise from left: The main dining room at The Lobby; passion fruit soufflé; Chef de Cuisine Lee Wolen

## The Lobby

108 E. Superior St. (in The Peninsula), 312.573.6760

Open for dinner nightly

Appetizers \$11-\$18  
Entrées \$21-\$54  
Dessert \$13-\$16

## What to Eat

Arctic char, roast chicken for two, passion fruit soufflé

## The Night Is Made for Chicken

The Lobby serves breakfast and lunch, too, but Wolen hasn't made many changes to these services. If you want to see what Wolen can do, you should focus on visiting during dinner.

## Homeboy

Though Wolen worked in New York at Eleven Madison Park, he grew up in Ohio and spent a lot of time working at Moto and the defunct Butter.



York City). But instead of installing Wolen as the new chef de cuisine of Avenues, the hotel gave him the helm of The Lobby and made Avenues an event space.

The Lobby, with its towering alabaster columns, crystal chandeliers, potted palms and golden sconces, has a glitzy Old Hollywood vibe. There's even a string duo that plays funky



### That's The Lobby's genius: contrasting ideas of contemporary and classic.

But while the dark meat is perfect, the breast meat is so tender, it lives on a dangerous precipice (but doesn't go over) of turning to mush. Perhaps there's too much butter in the brioche stuffing or the meat has been brined a bit too long.

The service in general at The Lobby is professional, courteous and attentive, and that includes a server who directs me to a nice, yeasty, dry glass of Simonet Champagne.

for warm brioche with my torchon. The Lobby's is lukewarm and losing crispness. But they make up for this with a thoughtful bread service that features tiny, warm bacon-stuffed buns and crisp baguettes served with a duo of butters, including a tangy goat milk one that I'd like to steal for my refrigerator at home.

Wolen's scallops are also buttery, tender, and a perfect medium rare at the center. They are adorned with a study in cauliflower, including roasted, pureed and thinly shaved raw slices. The whole plate is sauced in a frothy uni broth whose richness is blunted by plump, sweet golden raisins.

Cloud-light ricotta gnocchi splashed with brown butter, flanked by sour cranberries and topped with tiny leaves of micro-sage tastes like a one-dish encapsulation of Thanksgiving.

Like the chicken, another dish where classic and contemporary hit their note here is with a passion fruit soufflé from Executive Pastry Chef Hsing Chen (Warning: It really does take 20 minutes to cook. Order ahead.) It comes piping hot from the kitchen in a ceramic crock; its airy top rising over the ceramic lip. The soufflé, light as angel food and rife with fresh orange and lemon notes, is served with a side of passion fruit sauce.

As a final touch, The Lobby provides you with a series of mignardise, including a peanut butter chocolate truffle, the high-end answer to a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup, and cellophane-wrapped pumpkin bread, which I devour quickly the next day at breakfast.

The Peninsula has once again chosen wisely. They have a budding star in Wolen, just like they did with Bowles and Duffy. And, in time, The Lobby has a chance at matching or eclipsing the very best days at Avenues. ■

pizzicato versions of contemporary songs, including a version of Gnarlz Barkley's "Crazy."

That's The Lobby's genius: contrasting ideas of contemporary and classic. Having worked at Chicago's Moto and Eleven Madison Park, Wolen is a disciple of modern cooking and precision. Yet, he doesn't ply this experience in a confusing way. Instead he executes the best versions of traditional fine dining dishes (appetizers and entrées) with impeccable technique and a smart twist or two.

His chicken entrée "for two," stuffed with brioche breadcrumbs and roasted until its crust is a cracklin' pretzel brown, is one of the best, if not the best, roast birds in town.

After it's cooked, a food runner brings it to your table. I behold its taut glistening skin and the treelike bouquet of heady smelling herbs protruding from the chicken like a rare religious relic before it's taken away and a perfectly carved and plated breast arrives flanked by roasted Lady apples, tangles of squash and chocolate-infused jus. A few minutes later, luscious dark chicken meat is delivered in a tiny ceramic bowl. Though it is in many ways a classic roast chicken, the breadcrumb stuffed under the skin of the breast is a smart technique that does the double duty of adding buttery flavor and a contrasting crunch to the soft meat.

The wine list in general is surprisingly lean, but it's a smart thing. Most properties of this caliber fill their lists out with bottles that are prohibitively expensive to drink. The Lobby's list smartly features a lot of reasonably priced, food-friendly wines like riesling and gruner veltliner.

Another nice touch? Wolen walks the dining room often during the night, stopping for conversations with the room's mix of young first-daters and older, moneyed Gold Coasters. You can also feel Wolen's cheer through his food, which is lively and bursting with flavor.

Case in point: an appetizer of Arctic char flanked with orange bubbles of fish roe, bits of bursting citrus and roasted pumpernickel, which is salty, sweet and acidic, and one of the more balanced and flavorful dishes I've eaten in a while.

Another appetizer, a foie gras torchon candy-striped with gingerbread dust, has its richness offset by a sharp bitter orange marmalade and lemon balm. Although I hope



SEE WORTHY  
From top: Towering floor-to-ceiling windows provide stunning city views; Arctic char appetizer with creme fraiche, beets and horseradish