



SWEET TOOTH This dessert features apples prepared in a variety of ways, along with an apple fritter, hay cream, goat's milk ice cream and warm cider. Below: Executive Chef Thomas Lents (left) and Executive Pastry Chef Patrick Fahy

Reaching for the Stars

A change of guard at Sixteen ushers in a new era of fine dining.

| By Michael Nagrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier |

Thanks to its Trump International Hotel & Tower location and ownership, Sixteen pursues a level of detail and grace that most restaurants never even consider due to cost and/or effort. They give you a procession of snacks before your main meal and provide handmade chocolates after dessert. Recently, tables have been removed from the dining room (almost unheard of at hotels where revenue generation is everything), which makes the dining experience even more personal.

As such, the question isn't whether Sixteen is great. It is. The real question is: How great is it?

Measured by its attentiveness and the fine dining experience of the culinary staff, it's pretty stellar. The Sixteen team doesn't miss a detail.

Hiring a guy like general manager Will Douillet from the Alinea group, one of the best service organizations in the world, proved the Trump organization is serious about maintaining a high level of expertise. Though he's leaving—Douillet recently

announced he's moving to L.A. to team up with his old friend, *Top Chef* alum Michael Voltaggio, at ink.—Douillet's replacement will likely be of the same caliber. The same can be said of the recent installation of chef Thomas Lents, a Joël Robuchon protégé. The Trump organization was not willing to settle on any old toque, waiting almost six months before replacing former chef Frank Brunacci with Lents.

But to be truly great, you have to pursue your own style. Right now Sixteen is still a bit trapped in its original conservative build-out, which includes shiny wainscoting, linen tablecloths and a rosette-covered carpet that your grandma would love. I hear they're working on changing these things.

Admittedly, these are quibbles, but minor things make the difference when you're trying to garner three Michelin stars. The dining room is still beautiful, but it's not as clean as, say, Alinea or as Zen as L2O. Then again, it could be outfitted with Astroturf as CONTINUED...

Sixteen

401 N. Wabash (Trump Hotel)
312.588.8030

Open for lunch and dinner
Mon.-Sat., and brunch on Sun.

4 course tasting menu: \$110
8 course tasting menu: \$150
16 course tasting menu: \$210

Coffee-Conscious

One of the weaknesses of even the best restaurants is usually coffee service. The Sixteen team has been conducting blind tastings to find the best in Chicago. I had a beautiful, nicely acidic French-pressed Bow Truss Natural Yirgacheffe Gelana Abaya with dessert.

Grape Expectations

Sommelier Nathan Cowan is a really fun guy who picks wines for their food friendliness and not just because they're trophies. He tells great stories about all of them.

Homeboy

Though Lents worked under Robuchon and was the first American ever to serve as his chef de cuisine (at Joël Robuchon at the Mansion), he got his start at Everest under Jean Joho.

Serious Bling

The huge wedding cake chandelier in the main dining room is made with Swarovski crystals.



...CONTINUED much as anyone actually surveys it. When you're eye level with the flying buttresses of the Tribune Tower and the ivory clock tower of the Wrigley Building, you don't really care what's in the room. No other restaurant in Chicago, not even Everest, has as majestic a vista.

What is unquestionably great is the service at Sixteen. If you order Champagne before dinner as I do, the sommelier notices and replaces the bubbles he placed on giving you as part of the wine pairing with a Emile Beyer Alsatian Pinot Gris whose sweetness matches nicely with the sangria-poached foie gras served during the second course of the chef's tasting menu.

It used to be that the kind of older rich folks who dined at a place like Sixteen saw servers not so much as an ally, but as someone to do their bidding. The Facebook generation is making its millions quicker and younger diners instead want someone who can guide them collaboratively, someone they can interact with.

Sixteen's servers are certainly equipped for old money—they can talk first-growth Bordeaux if they need to—but mostly they're dynamic folks who try to be themselves. My server Sam is an actor and a former semipro hockey player. When he finds out I'm a huge Detroit Red Wings fan, we talked hockey half the night. This is not the kind of thing you would have ever found at Charlie Trotter's.

Lents, too, has started to cook in a unique style, which you can experience through one of his multicourse tasting menus (though an "official" à la carte menu is no longer available for dinner, chefs will work with guests to meet their needs). One of his "snack" courses, sweet and salty lemon-pepper Parmesan popcorn served inside a hollowed corn husk, is fun and tasty. I'd happily pay 10 bucks for a bucket at the local Cineplex. Likewise, tiny fillets of flour-dusted smelt (an unenviable task for the poor cook who had to cut hundreds of these off the bone), whose heaviness is cut by tangy caper foam, bright lemon and pickled green tomato relish, is a nice upscale nod to a Wisconsin fish fry.

Lents' melting turbot, swimming in a pumpkin oil dotted butter wine reduction sauce strewn with salsify and cut with a bit of mustard acid, is rich and comforting. The dish's pumpkin perfume is an original invocation of a Midwestern autumn.

On the other hand, the smelt dish is larded with edible flowers, which feels like an old French chef



ROOM WITH A VIEW
Clockwise from left: The main dining room at Sixteen with its Swarovski crystal chandelier and breathtaking views; pink pearl apple sorbet served inside a pink sugar apple shell; lightly smoked trout with charred leeks

trick. Many other dishes are garnished with edible gold leaf or "painted" with sauces that offer very little flavor. If Lents wants to blow minds, he's better off serving his halibut course, featuring flaky fish in a clean coriander-based green curry. Curry is usually heavy, but Lents' is light and wafts a beautiful scent of coriander and lemongrass.

Lents isn't the only one taking cues from the past. Executive Pastry Chef Patrick Fahy (formerly of Blackbird and more recently Café des Architectes) serves a ripe mission fig in a thyme and honey-flavored toasted almond cream. The flavors are brilliant, but the serving dish, a boiling Macbeth-channeling cauldron of dry ice and purple smoking water, is a little cheesy.

But, then again, Fahy's composed cheese course, hunks of Cashel blue whose funk is tempered by a stream of red currants and soda bread lacquered with sweet malt syrup, is a nice antidote to the usual rote service of crackers and mustard on a cutting board.

On that question of greatness: Sixteen is one of Chicago's very best restaurants. It's in the same realm as Alinea and L2O (under Laurent Gras), but because it hasn't quite pursued its own voice entirely, it's just a notch under those giants. I think of Sixteen right now as the 2004 Olympic basketball team. Though it was loaded with young NBA stars like Dwyane Wade and LeBron James, they only took the bronze. After a little hard work and maturity, those two guys took home the gold in 2008. ■

