



60 FISH Black olive-and sesame-crusted sea trout

A Family Affair

The highly anticipated Trenchermen has been worth the wait.

| By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Anthony Tahlier |

The phrase “taking a bath” in the context of executing something, especially a venture measured by financial success, is usually a bad thing. But at Trenchermen, the new Wicker Park venture from brothers Michael and Pat Sheerin, Matt Eisler and Kevin Heisner, going for a “swim” is quite the delicious adventure.

Of course, you’re not bathing in the literal sense. Rather, the restaurant is located in what was once a 1920s bathhouse—and more recently, Spring restaurant—a meeting space for gangsters to schwitz and swap bootlegging schemes. Walking down the short stairwell to the bar area and main dining room—outfitted with old gramophone horns, nautical rope-enrobbed light fixtures, a faux flickering porthole fireplace and what looks like a trio of sprouting caterpillar chrysalises that turn out to be chandeliers—feels like a clandestine descent into a speakeasy. Trencherman is part dark, mysterious, old-timey lair and part fantastical industrial underground.

It’s a beautiful visual signal that at Trenchermen the brothers Sheerin are aiming to create something we’ve never seen. Pat, a chef who made his bones running the Signature Room, was known for serving up elegant, but ultimately tourist-friendly fare. To his credit, the food was always well-executed, and he snuck local farm ingredients in whenever he could. Brother Mike recharged Blackbird with a modern approach honed at NYC’s pioneering molecular gastronomy temple WD50. And so Trenchermen, a modern American restaurant that serves small and larger shareable plates, is a mashup of both their styles—sometimes outrageous, sometimes inspiring—but also often grounded in pristine local ingredients and classic technique.

The best dish at Trenchermen, the Sepia noodles—which includes ribbons of tender cuttlefish (sepia) mimicking noodles tossed with bright lime-pickled compressed watermelon and crispy CONTINUED...

Trenchermen

2039 W. North Ave.,
773.661.1540

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

Plates \$8-\$24, Desserts \$9

What to Eat

Sepia noodles, bacon-cured sweetbreads, spiced coffee cake

Casual, but Sophisticated

The vibe may be laid-back, but that dude stalking the dining room in the bow tie is Beverage Director Tona Palomino, a vet, like Mike Sheerin, of the legendary Jean Georges Restaurant in NYC. Palomino’s also a French Culinary Institute grad.

Beer Me, Baby

The sense of community at Trenchermen is inspired by early 20th century beer halls. This makes perfect sense as Mike Sheerin spent a bit of time revamping the menu at Three Floyd’s beer pub before launching Trenchermen.

Hip to be Hip

Beards, thrift store-chic, natty glasses. Check, check and check. Hipsters, they’re falling out of every corner. Bring a sense of irony and you’ll be fine.

What is a Trenchermen Anyway?

I thought they made it up. I know you did too. But it turns out trencherman, which means “a hearty eater,” has been in the lexicon since 1590.

...CONTINUED garlic chips—is a riff on a technique Mike used to do at Blackbird. It's a refreshing melange of summer (juicy melon) by the sea (briny cuttlefish).

But for every fancy four-star-restaurant-level dish like this, there's also a reminder that the Sheerins are guy's guys, and no plate is more emblematic than the Pickle Tots. In what is best described as *Napoleon Dynamite* meets Thomas Keller, the Sheerins take a tater tot, but substitute a bit of the potato filler with chopped pickle, which with every bite squirts a bit of dill acidity that cuts through all the fat. And that's just one element of the dish. There are also billowing sheets of pounded chicken bresaola (think fancy roast chicken sandwich meat) and pale purple dollops of tangy red onion yogurt dip. In some ways this plate is like a Sunday Night Football deli tray for the aspiring gourmand.

Speaking of football snacks, I'm not ashamed to admit I order the short rib mostly because it's topped with something called Trencheritos, which turn out to be black pepper masa chips, sort of a Goth Frito, which make a nice crispy counterpoint to planks of tender sous vide short ribs and silky housemade mustard-infused garganelli pasta.

Really, the more I think about it, the food theme at Trenchermen is precision-technique-driven cuisine whose fussiness is mitigated by a streak best described as a gourmet weekend snack binge. Consider the bacon-cured sweetbreads: salty, funky, crispy, addictive, you want to pop them in your mouth like potato chips. And yet, while the sweetbreads tap in to a very base craving, they're garnished with a complex savory assortment featuring a dainty rosette of pickled carrot, wisps of toasted seaweed and a fancy swoosh of black garlic sauce.

The only savory dish I have any issue with is the Pekin duck breast. The duck is aged for seven days in-house, cooked sous vide to rare and pan-roasted to a perfect cracklin'. But, while the funky rare bit of duck is elegant, the accompanying fried kimchee mortadella rice balls are gluey and underseasoned.

But, with the kind of risks the Sheerins are taking, there's bound to be some failure. Fortunately for them, most of that failure is in the dining room and not on the plate. Service at Trenchermen does not match the quality of the food. My waiter takes forever to get to my



table. He takes even more time to take my order. When I ask him about a certain sparkler, I see the fear on his face that he can't remember what it is, so he riffs, saying it's "mineral-rich and dry." This would be a safe bet for many sparklers, but he comes back with the bottle and sheepishly says, "Oh, I'm sorry. It's actually on the sweet side and made from pears." I'd let that go, because he came clean, but then there's an interminable wait between courses. I can also barely get empty drink glasses refilled, which is a shame because cocktails like the *Viaje*, an elixir of herbal-tinged absinthe, syrupy pineapple and almost whiskey-like Mezcal, are quite good.

I do appreciate that when the waiter shows up to take our dessert order, he acknowledges the long wait for our courses and offers to buy dessert. That's a smart move in our favor, for desserts like the coffee cake, featuring moist cake with quenelles of cardamom-perfumed chai ice cream and tufts of smoked meringue, are just as good as the savory fare. The bitter grapefruit infusion of Three Floyd's Gumball Head beer into a custard flanked with Michigan blueberries and leaves of basil is daring. My only regret is that I coveted a chance to taste the candied cumin churros with white dulce de leche listed on the Trenchermen website, but they were not on the menu the night I dined. Then again that's just something to look forward to next time I take a dip at Trenchermen. ■

HOT PLATES
Clockwise from top left: The wine wall; Beverage Director Tona Palomino pouring a wine on draft; the Bridge and Tunnel cocktail; Trenchermen's Michael Sheerin, Patrick Sheerin, Kevin Heiser and Matt Eisler; Sepia noodles. Left: The bar area

