

eat & drink



KAITLYN MCQUAID PHOTOS FOR REDEYE

Bite night

Destination-worthy dishes at Italian newcomer Cicchetti

By Michael Nigrant | FOR REDEYE
Chicago is in the midst of such an Italian restaurant renaissance that you can almost smell the garlic in the air. The prince of orange clogs, Mario Batali, and his band of merry culinarians recently opened Eataly, a castle for fresh pasta and parmigiano-reggiano procurement. Paul Kahan just debuted Nico in the Gold Coast. And now, from Michael Sheerin (formerly of Trenchermen and Kahan's Blackbird) and restaurateur Dan Rosenthal (Poag

Cicchetti
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Mahone's, Sopraffina, Trattoria No. 10) comes Cicchetti, a Venetian-inspired small plates emporium in Streeterville.

Cicchetti (pronounced "chick-ket-tee") are appetizers, kind of like the Italian version of Spanish tapas—small bites, often meant for sharing. In Venice, they're often served at bacari or osterias, which proffer salty snacks and simple food to complement wine or cocktails. Cicchetti was not the pio-

neer of this concept in Chicago; that title belongs to Andersonville's Bar Ombra. But where Ombra is a quirky little spot outfitted with bits of architectural salvage and a roaring fireplace that serves a lot of cold bean salads, Cicchetti is a fine-dining temple.

The menu includes larger plates such as a family-style seafood stew (\$34 for one or two people, or \$64 for three to four) and a 21-day-aged grass-fed New York strip steak (\$28), but I filled up instead on these dishes from the namesake cicchetti section of the menu. **REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS**

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Aged hanger steak carpaccio

Sheerin's presentations often look like scenes from a peaceful forest. A carpet of marbled, thinly sliced circles of beef was topped with a garden of wispy cauliflower slices, splashes of pale green aioli and a sprinkle of sour and fruity sorrel leaves (\$15). The beef itself looks like standard carpaccio, but there's way more to it. The slices of hormone- and antibiotic-free meat come from house-butchered hanger steaks that have been formed into a cylinder and glued together with transglutaminase (also known as meat glue) and aged for two weeks in a fridge; during that time, the beef loses moisture and a mineral-rich flavor concentrates. The cauliflower is dehydrated in an oven until crispy and tastes like an earthy potato chip, and the aioli is blended with sweet golden raisins and tangy capers to make a velvety sauce that moistens the air-dried beef. If you can only order one dish off the cicchetti section, this is it.



Warm roasted olives with focaccia and spreads

While I've never had carpaccio quite like the one at Cicchetti, I've had warm roasted olives (\$8) before. Then again, I've never had them served with sweet and sour giardiniera, bittersweet kumquat marmalade (both housemade) and a melting crescent moon of European butter. This trio is the perfect slather for the side of crusty focaccia made by sous and pastry chef Sarah Jordan (GT Fish & Oyster, Boka). This bread, which is made from an heirloom sourdough starter, has a bubbled airy interior and features twice as many nooks and crannies as an English muffin.



Bruschette assortite

The bruschette (\$8 for three, \$14 for six) here are not soggy slices covered in pale chopped tomato and wilted basil. These grilled rounds of bread are piled high with garnishes that include creamy preserved tuna with pickled shallot, a lick of luscious duck liver pate studded with cocoa nibs, and a thick slice of pork belly over shaved fennel.

House-cured sardines

Sardines are often tiny and/or bony, but these (\$14) are massive, meaty planks that have been salted, sweetened with sugar, lightly pickled and left to cure for a few days. The flesh is moist and ruby-colored and the skin briny and sweet. The fish is served with an herb-laden horseradish cream and pumpernickel toast, which is run through the house pasta maker to make it crisp and thin.



Pork cracklins

Speaking of pork, a shallow steel wok-like bowl is filled with fried cracklins (\$7) and then showered with salty parmesan and rosemary. The arrangement of curled pig skin looks like a mess of mysterious sea creature tentacles, and I pretty much polished it all off by myself. I really love the vinegar punch on the pork rinds they serve at The Publican, but right after those, these rinds might be the next best in town.



Salt cod and pancetta croquettes

These savory little doughnut hole-like orbs (\$9) are made from salt cod mixed with pancetta that's fried and tossed on a plate of lemony aioli. Like the cracklins, I popped these in my mouth like candy and the plate was demolished in minutes.

The bottom line

Sheerin and Jordan alone would be a great set of chefs, but with sous chef Phil Rubino (L20, Acadia) also on board, Cicchetti's crew is truly a dream team. Their Italian small plates look simple and classic, but the technique and flavor underpinning their work is as complex, detailed and as pleasing as the stuff you'd find at Spiaggia. Frankly, it's more inventive and it costs at least half as much.

