



# diningout

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Try the whole wheat pasta with smoked duck, porcinis, sugar snaps and raw egg, at City Tavern. | DOM NAJOLIA-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS



The striploin burger on potato bun almost lives up to its hype, but falls short. The potato chips are fried in duck fat.



One of City Tavern's highlights is the specialty drink, Mrs. O'Leary's Summer Milk Punch.

# SWEET SPOT

## City Tavern's desserts are the stars of the menu

I don't know if man can subsist on cocktails and dessert alone. But were I to test that hypothesis I can think of no better place to try than the City Tavern, the new, rustic American spot in the South Loop.

In these times of challenging sweet selections, where dedicated pastry chefs are rare, where a brownie doused in ice cream is often your only hope, City Tavern slings a splendid selection of confection, thanks to the artistry of executive chef Kendal Duque. The cream pie is a custard of the gods flecked with toasted

coconut swimming in a moat of thick cat's meow-inducing cream. The cheesecake is a cloud-light citadel of velvet and its fresh market blueberry drizzle a fruity foil. City Tavern's mousse, roofed with sugar-lacquered pralines and a sliver of hearty ganache, is a treasure of tiny chocolate bubbles. Creme brulee, redolent with pistachio and the cherry-almond perfume of amaretto is a splendid rebuff of what is most often a tired cliché. The pastry here is so good that even if you are one of those people who says "nothing for me" when the

dessert order is placed, you will be the first to pick up that extra spoon the server always brings to stuff yourself silly.

Even the teetotalers among you will not be able to resist the waft of shaved nutmeg floating on an elixir of ginger-infused rum and clarified milk that is the Mrs. O'Leary's Summer Milk Punch. And once the cow kicks, you will not go gentle into that good night. You will burn through The Improved Holland cocktail and its juniper-scented Genever splashed with the herbal essence of absinthe and the sunny kick

of citrus. You will rage, and soon if you have too many of City Tavern's Fish House Punch, a brown tea of cognac, rum and peach brandy infused with a slab of bright lemon zest, meet the dying of the light.

But such liquid courage is a necessity to make it through the savory portion of any evening at City Tavern. The duck fat-fried potato chips are soaked with the greasy sheen of deep fryer oil, and the salt-light beef cheeks, though tender, are slicked with the slime of broken-down connective tissue. The shrimp po' boy is po' indeed, though the nuggets of tempura-fried shrimp are fairly spectacular, they are

### CITY TAVERN ★

1416 S. Michigan  
(312) 663-1278; citytavernchicago.com

Hours: 4 p.m. – 2 a.m. (kitchen closes at 11 p.m.) Monday – Thursday; 4 p.m. – 2 a.m. (kitchen closes at midnight) Friday; 4 p.m. – 3 a.m. Saturday (kitchen closes at midnight); 4 p.m. – 11 p.m. Sunday

Prices: Shared plates \$7-15; Entrees \$9-19; Desserts \$7

Try: Whole wheat pasta with duck, wild salmon with blood orange bearnaise, and coconut cream pie

In a bite: Skip the dinner and head straight for the cocktails and dessert at this South Loop re-creation of an American tavern.

KEY: ★★★★★ Extraordinary; ★★★★ Excellent; ★★★ Very Good; ★ Good; Zero stars: Poor

bone dry, the would-be wetting remoulade soaked into a pathetic hot dog bun. A friend from New Orleans dining with me declares it an affront to his heritage.

The fish and shellfish pie featuring a gratineed mound of mashed potato looks mag-

nificent, but dig in and the fresh catch — quivering scallops — are ice cold. Accompanying bits of shrimp and salmon are soggy, and the promised lobster sherry sauce tastes like paste.

The aged striploin burger, recently declared "Chicago's Best"

by a prominent local magazine, would indeed hold that title based on the perfect, dripping, grassy, funky patty alone, but the half-melted cheddar slice and dry potato bun on top snap it from such jaws of victory.

These failures are confusing, for Duque was magnificent when he opened Sepia a few years ago in the West Loop. Though he didn't invent the form, he was one of the early masters of the rustic small plate.

There are still glimmers of Duque's skill at City Tavern. The ruby-red grapefruit-hued wild salmon is flaky and cooked perfectly rare. It is swaddled in a beautiful blood orange-flavored bearnaise and flanked by verdant

stalks of juicy asparagus. A tangle of nicely chewy whole wheat noodles dripping with egg and tossed with mahogany planks of smoked duck meat is a smart fowl-riff on traditional carbonara. But then again, Duque's flatbread is so burnt at the edges that not even crispy screams of glorious applewood-smoked bacon can resurrect it.

City Tavern's servers are so enthusiastic you wonder if they're overcompensating for the mediocrity of what they're serving. Our waitress is the consummate professional, quick with a recommendation and never shy to keep us away from what she knows is a sure misstep.

But as good as she is, her vin-

tage gas station attendant-style shirt and arm tattoos are also at odds with her surroundings. City Tavern drips a Southern lawyer charm. With its flocked wall-paper, dark wood wainscoting, lathe turned spindle clad seating and flickering gas-light style lanterns, the dining room is a mash-up of Paul Revere's Boston and "Gone With the Wind's" South.

Michael Nagrant is a local free-lance writer. Follow on Twitter @michaelnagrant. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.



Wild salmon with asparagus, lump crab and blood orange bearnaise came out perfectly flaky.