



diningout

BY MICHAEL NAGRANT email diningout@suntimes.com | Follow @michaelnagrant

DESTINATION DINING



Chef Mike Simmons presents the gnocchi with wild boar sausage at Lula Cafe, 2537 N. Kedzie. | TOM CRUZE-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

Lula Cafe remains a highlight of Chicago's culinary scene

There are restaurants, and then there are movements that happen to serve great food. Lula Cafe (named after the fiery southern actress Tallulah Bankhead), the 13-year-old Logan Square restaurant/cafe from owners Amalea Tshilds and Jason Hammel, is most definitely the latter.

There are few restaurants as long-lived or as influential, as creative or wide-reaching in what they seek to achieve. Nowadays, everyone is concerned with creating a neighborhood touchstone, serving value-priced gourmet food and pimping their local farms. Ten years ago there was, mostly, only Lula.

Lula has never stopped evolving. What began as a simple coffee house fronted by a former TGI Friday's line cook (Hammel) is now a restaurant grounded in the local/sustainable ethos of Alice Waters' Chez Panisse, the detail and thoughtful approach to cooking espoused by Thomas Keller at the French Laundry and the ideal of an American version of a French brasserie.

Though Hammel doesn't cook much these days, he's mentored guys who cook very well: Jason Vincent who now runs Lula's sister restaurant, Nightwood, and current chef, Michael Simmons.

Though many of the classic value-priced cafe dishes, such as the cinnamon-sprinkled, brown butter-enrobed bucatini, aka "Pasta YiaYia" (invented by Hammel), are always on offer, Simmons' thoughtful, nuanced dinner menu is what makes Lula a destination today.

His sweet apple soup, poured



The sweet apple soup is a complex mix of ingredients, poured tableside.

tableside and garnished with firm black quinoa, crisp spicy turnips, meaty matsutake mushrooms and dolloped with bracing pine cream and smoky bonito, is as complex, delicate and tasty as anything you'd find at Alinea or L20.

Same goes for sepia, tender ringlets of baby squid braised in their own ink and stuffed with salty, funky, country ham and splashed with sour tamarind and tangy lime. It is one of the best things I have eaten this year.

But, among that kind of precision and perfection, there is also a series of execution errors. "Chips and Dip," a black truffle-flavored sunchoke custard, is served with wispy, shaved, root vegetable and potato chips whose crispness is compromised by the sheen of too much residual deep-fry oil. The dip is rich and the flavor is deeply com-



The delectable sepia is tender ringlets of baby squid braised in its ink and stuffed with country ham.

forting, but the texture is blobby and breaks apart in oily curds.

Slow-roasted pork shoulder is not roasted slowly enough, as the ample connective tissue and collagen in the cut, which usually melts away, is still tough, and the meat is thus chewy. Fried oysters served on the side of the plate are a touch soggy, and the Brussels sprouts are limp and undersalted.

But then again, gnocchi showered with wisps of taleggio are so tender they would melt under a strong whisper. The integrity of snappy wild-boar sausage, perfumed with fennel and nestled alongside the gnocchi, is a smart and satisfying contrast.

The south dining room, slightly claustrophobic, dimly lit and outfitted with an upright piano, is as warm as the cuisine. The atmosphere is so convivial, your neighbor might offer a bite of his crispy pan-roasted mullet if you stare too long at it, as happened to me on one visit. The north bar area, an expansion

created last year, is a little cold and a little too open. If you're seated in one of the bay window tables on a cool night, it gets a little drafty. Both rooms, though, are outfitted not with a careless smattering of haphazard local art, but with a thoughtful, thematically linked gallery installation curated by Anders Nilsen (a graphic novelist who once worked as a cook at Lula) and

Marianne Fairbanks (a Humboldt Park artist and designer) that rotates regularly.

The service, like the execution of the kitchen, is also an interesting dichotomy. My server could describe almost every wine on the list, but when my glass was empty, we had to ask a food runner to find her and take another drink order. By the time the wine arrived, I'd finished my



Pastry chef Kate Neumann is one of the best in Chicago. She makes sure Lula's desserts rule. ABOVE: the chocolate roulade. RIGHT: ginger snap cake with semifreddo granita.



LULA CAFE ★★

2537 N. Kedzie,
(773) 489-9554; lulacafe.com

Hours: Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Thursday, 9 a.m. to midnight (dining room), bar open until 1 a.m.; Friday and Saturday 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. (dining room), bar open until 2 a.m.

Prices: appetizers, \$9-\$12; entrees, \$19-\$26; dessert, \$8-\$10

Try: Savory apple soup, stuffed squid, gnocchi and gingerbread

In a bite: Chicago's enduring example of what a neighborhood restaurant should be.

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

last savory course and moved on to dessert.

Dessert may be one of Hammel's most thoughtful gestures yet. In a time when many restaurants don't have a dedicated pastry chef, he hired Kate Neumann (formerly of MK) and gave her a separate pastry gallery to focus on her craft. Save for Meg Galus at NoMi Kitchen and Mindy Segal at Hot Chocolate, there are few better pastry chefs working in Chicago right now.

Neumann's sticky gingerbread cake is fluffy and redolent with hot, sweet aromatics and cooled by an accompanying melting of sheep's milk semifreddo topped with a refreshing slush of apple cider granita. Her chocolate roulade is lacquered with a shiny bitter ganache and ringed with crisps of sesame brittle and luxurious swaths of tahini-larded milk-chocolate mousse. Her coffee ice cream (served on the side of the roulade) infused with Lula's custom Intelligentsia blend is exquisite. If Lula is a movement, Neumann's desserts are their own separate glorious rebellion.

Michael Nagrant is a local freelance writer. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.