

eat & drink

Handmade pasta

MODEL LOOKS

Sizing up One Off Hospitality's Gold Coast dazzler

By Michael Nigrant | FOR REDEYE
She didn't like her name. Herbert Tobias, the photographer who discovered her, agreed. "Christa Paffgen" was guttural, inelegant, a moniker certainly not befitting the sharp beauty of the woman before him, the one with blunt bangs, sad eyes and cheekbones so high they seemed sprung from the edges of her forehead. One of the first of the modern supermodels would from then on be known as Nico, a homage to Tobias' former lover, Greek film director Nikos Papatakis.

That was 1954. Nico became the prototype for models like Kate Moss and Gisele Bündchen, the epicenter of Andy Warhol's The Factory, the chanteuse of Lou Reed and John Cale's band The Velvet Underground

and a darling of the '60s.

In 2013, Chicago has its own darling, a culinary one: One Off Hospitality, whose partners include chef Paul Kahan, Donnie Madia, Terry Alexander, Rick Diarmit and Eduard Seitan. They launched Blackbird, Avec, The Publican, Publican Quality Meats, The Violet Hour and Big Star. Their ideas were all hits.

Their latest venture was a chic osteria serving simple clean Italian seafood, but it needed a proper name.

"We played around with many Italian words, but they were too hard to pronounce," Madia said. While paging through a book about Andy Warhol, he stumbled on photos of Nico. "There she was ... this beautiful creature, perfect!"

Nico Osteria
1015 N. Rush St.
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Heating up

I'll Be Your Mirror

When Blackbird opened in 1997, the section of Randolph Street on which it was located was not the restaurant now it has become. It was a gritty conveyance from the Loop to the Kennedy. Most of the locations that Madia, Kahan and company chose, whether it was Avec next door or Publican in the middle of the meatpacking district, were always a little edgy. The food was so good, the spaces so cool, that the fanciest of Gold Coasters were pulled from their graystones to try them. In the early days, the guys behind One Off Hospitality didn't go to the mainstream. It came to them.

Nico is a reversal of that. It's still original, unless your nonna went to culinary school, few things on its menu would be recognizable from her dinner table. But with Nico, One Off has gone to the folks they once drew toward themselves. They have settled in at the base of the swank Thompson Chicago hotel in the Viagra Triangle, right across from Gibson's steakhouse. On my way to Nico, I passed four Lamborghinis, a million dollars worth of cars

parked right up the street. A nearby table was stocked with bro-flionares coaring in united laughter about stock trading gone awry. Gold-bangled and wrap-dress-clad cougars were on the prowl.

Femme Fatale

Nico is, like so much of its clientele, lavish. The bar and dining room is a showy, mesmerizing knockout with a tin ceiling, towering live plant wall, convex porthole-like mirrors and tufted velvet sofas. Everything about Nico, as "Swingers"-era Vince Vaughn used to say, is "money." You can just drop in for the party, but if you have a marriage proposal, a promotion to celebrate or a date to impress, Nico will shine as a backdrop.

I'm Waiting for the Man

Given that kind of pomp, you'd expect the service to shine. Instead, at times the place felt understaffed. My friend and I sat for 10 minutes before our server appeared with menus. When I finished my excellent Mas-



Nico Osteria
RENA NALTSAS PHOTO FOR REDEYE

RESERVATION TIP

After just a few weeks open, reservations at Nico are already hard to come by. Try the first-come, first-served lounge area if you're not able to snag a table in the dining room.

simo cocktail (\$12) featuring grape-y grappa and white wine-toned pistachio syrup shaken and served over crushed ice (Matty Eggleston, formerly of Perennial Virant and Bar DeVille, heads up the bar program), the glass sat empty while I ate two courses. I couldn't find our server, so I had to hail another for the wine list.

Despite the waiting, the service at Nico seemed primed to deliver. Madia appeared midway through the night, wearing a blazer and 1980s-worthy ripped acid-wash jeans, and glad-handed at nearby tables. I appreciated that food runners switched out silverware and plates with every course, which was crucial given the family-style service and the potential to mix flavors and sauces from each of the dishes we ordered.

Heroin

As Lou Reed of The Velvet Underground sang, "First thing you learn is you always gotta wait ... He's got the works, gives you sweet taste." Kahan's food has always been my drug of choice. I was fine enduring the M.I.A. servers

to get a taste of it.

At Nico, Kahan collaborates with chef de cuisine Erling Wu-Bower, who has worked his whole career with One Off (Avec, Publican). Wu-Bower is killing it. The opening menu has almost 50 dishes split into six main areas: crudo (raw or lightly cured fish), fettunta (bruschetta), antipasti (salads and small plates), pasta, piatti (large plates) and contorni (vegetable sides). Parties of two who choose one plate from four of the six sections and share a dessert will be plenty full.

My favorite dish was puree of fava bean flavored with bottarga (salted cured fish roe) topped with a crisp salad of fennel, radish and briny sweet dungeness crab adorned with wispy thin crackers that looked like the billowing spinnakers of a yacht (\$18). Spiedini (\$17), or skewers of grilled smoky sweetbreads enrobed in sweet and salty slices of pancetta and topped with thick, meaty slices of sauteed royal trumpet mushrooms, were like addictive, savory bonbons. My friend and I threw them back with abandon, racing to see who could eat the most before we ran out.

The dish that was closest to what your Italian grandmother might serve was the Neapolitan-style ragu (\$18 per person). A red lacy-patterned trivet was set on the table, and a pot bubbling with an Italian red sauce gravy was placed on top. In the middle of the gravy was a tender hunk of braised pork belly, a juicy golf ball-sized swordfish meatball and a fried square of risotto. The sauce, which had a hint of sweetness, a bit of spice and a meaty richness, was deeply comforting. I scraped every last remaining drop up with a spoon (I wish the kitchen served up a side of bread for sopping up leftovers) once the meatball, pork belly and fried risotto had disappeared.

There She Goes Again

Pastry chef Amanda Rockman picked up where she left off at previous post Balena, serving hand-crafted gelatos and complex well-crafted desserts at Nico. I especially liked the creamy burnt honey gelato (\$3) garnished with a lacy pizelle cookie. If you're tired of the gloppy bricks of tiramisu served at most Italian restaurants, you'll love Rockman's

version (\$11), a shooter filled with white coffee cream (coffee that's cold-infused so the cream doesn't pick up any bitterness or color), marsala wine-spiked mousse, a crispy crunchy layer of aged ladyfinger bits and a creamy Valrhona milk chocolate cremeux (a custard that has a texture somewhere between a pudding and a mousse).

It Was a Pleasure Then

From Blackbird to Big Star, One Off Hospitality has put out a series of spectacular restaurants. Nico, which has impeccable seafood and clean, light flavors, just might just be the most elegant and the biggest hit yet. The cozy kitchen counter seating and L-shaped layout of the dining room provides an intimate experience that falls somewhere between the claustrophobia of Blackbird and the expansiveness of The Publican. Whatever your occasion, it is the place you should celebrate all of tomorrow's parties.

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