

FOOD DRINK | REVIEW



**GREEN WEAVER** Clockwise from left: A cozy nook features farm-themed wallcoverings; lobster-stuffed avocado; snipping wheatgrass at the bar; a chandelier made from recycled cardboard in the main dining room



**Prasino**

★★½  
1846 W. Division St.,  
312.878.1212, prasino.com

What the stars mean:

- ★ fair, some noteworthy qualities
- ★★ good, above average
- ★★★ very good, well above norm
- ★★★★ excellent, among the area's best
- ★★★★★ world-class, extraordinary in every detail

Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambiance and service.

## You've Been Served

**Suburban transplant Prasino arrives in Wicker Park with stellar sustainable fare.**

| By Michael Nagrant |  
| Photography by Anthony Tablier |

So much depends on a server. But it wasn't always that way. Except for high-end restaurants, I was so resigned to receiving mediocre service in Chicago that I'd sort of stopped using it as any kind of bellwether in a review. If the service was inspired, that might change a rating, but otherwise it was kind of white noise.

It had gotten to the point that when I was visiting family in suburban Detroit and got roped in to hitting some chain restaurants, I was floored at how good the service was. Sure, the waitresses had ratty hair, smacked their gum and looked straight out of central casting. But they actually recommended stuff (even if it was the super riblet plate), refilled drinks before they were half drained and didn't forget your order.

That's because they were professionals. They weren't working their way up to a spot at Alinea or doing improv at Second City hoping for a spot on *SNL*.

I don't know if it's the stagnancy of the local economy but I've finally noticed Chicago servers starting to up their game. On many recent restaurant visits, it was the waiters who were making and breaking my dining experiences.

My recent visits to Prasino, a new "eco-chic" restaurant in Wicker Park open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, an offshoot of sister restaurants in La Grange and St. Charles, is no exception. In fact, my first Prasino experience was enhanced greatly by my server; the second, not so much. Yet, no matter the server, the globally influenced contemporary American food—which features locally grown and organic produce when possible—shines through.

First up in the server showdown is Charles. He, like the title of the now-defunct Scott Baio show, is "in charge." Young, whipsmart, wise-cracking and a veteran of the recently shuttered Jerry Kleiner spot *Marché* (information he gave up when I asked), he doesn't even wait for us to inquire about dish recommendations. He's running through the menu, gushing about ingredients, technique and his favorite cocktail. He **CONTINUED...**

**WHAT TO WEAR**

Jeans and nice button-downs for everyone

**WHAT TO ORDER**

Lobster-stuffed avocado, togarashi-spiced escolar, chocolate and peanut butter cake

**WHAT TO KNOW**

Breakfast and lunch are also really good

**WHO GOES**

Bucktown families and Wicker Park pre-clubbing diners

**WHAT IT COSTS**

Appetizers, salads, maki rolls and flatbreads \$5-\$20; entrées: \$14-\$32; desserts \$7

...CONTINUED doesn't look like he's working as much as he's hosting a really cool party.

He sort of is; for Prasino—with its recycled corrugated cardboard chandeliers, modern glass fireplace and dark wood—looks like the swank bachelor lair of a young Internet tycoon. ("Prasino" is Greek for "green" and reflects the restaurants' mantra to serve clean food in environmentally conscious settings.) All the cool people seem to be out tonight. As I settle in for dinner, I notice Alexi Giannoulas, former bank scion and Illinois Treasurer, rocking a low-slung ball cap, stopping by the patio to talk to some friends.

After Charles brings me Prasino's "Clean" cocktail, a mix of whiskey, ginger beer, pear and Peychaud's Bitters, he stops back a few minutes later to find out how I like it. It doesn't feel like an obligatory server move. While I gush about the great mix of spicy ginger and how the anise note from the bitters tempers the sweetness of the pear, Charles is lapping up the feedback as if I'd just passed him Donald Trump's ATM card and pin number.

Charles evangelizes the lobster-stuffed half avocado small plate, and pimps the escolar and short ribs entrées like Don King working a boxing press conference. While I appreciate server guidance, I'm usually a little suspect, imagining those selections are whatever the restaurant makes good margins on. But, in Charles I believe.

The lobster dish is everything promised, jazzed up with a spicy chili butter sauce and bright mango salsa. There's probably half a lobster's worth of succulent juicy claw and tail meat in it.

The short ribs are classic tender shards of red wine-soaked beef perched on a bed of cauliflower cheddar gratin and, unfortunately, over-salted braised greens. When I relay this to Charles, he looks like I just told him my grandma died. He offers to bring a replacement. No worries, for the escolar, a luscious hunk of flaky flesh dusted with fiery togarashi (a traditional Japanese chili seasoning) and cut with the floral citrus acidity of a ponzu sauce, is perfect.

Charles, though, like a fireworks display designer, saves the best for last, guiding me to the aptly named chocolate and peanut butter gooey butter cake. I like my cakes moist and sturdy. Gooney is an adjective I prefer to reserve for hair gel. However, it turns out to be a good descriptor for the messy, but comforting, pudding-skin-like chocolate base crowned by candied nuts and silky peanut butter crunch gelato. It's almost a perfect night.

Unfortunately, when I return to Prasino a few weeks later, Charles is nowhere to be seen. I get Helga instead (names have been changed to protect the guilty), a plodding, disinterested antithesis to the spritely and empathetic Charles.

She brings us fish tacos, plump smoky grilled whitefish nuggets tossed into a nest of cabbage slaw and kicked up with a bit of limey poblano cream and wrapped in a warm tortilla. They're as good as any I've



**NATURE'S BOUNTY**  
Clockwise from top: Asian chopped salad; grilled escolar with sautéed greens; the expansive Prasino sidewalk patio



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had in town. Unfortunately I can only call it whitefish, because when I asked Helga what fish it is, she tells me she doesn't know. She leaves to ask the kitchen, but never returns with an answer.

I order a "kombucha-mosa" cocktail (fermented tea, orange juice, muddled basil, agave). It takes 10 minutes to arrive, and our entrées come a significant time after that. There's no explanation for the long wait, only a silent glare from Helga across the patio. The alcohol-free drink is bright and fresh; however it lacks a really good fizz. Though the arugula is peppery in the sesame seared ahi tuna salad, it's also woefully underseasoned save for the nice bite of wasabi caviar sprinkled around the bowl. I might have mentioned it to Helga, but she's missing in action.

I finish with a sweet-salty crème brûlée battered in a "pretzel" croissant and drizzled with white chocolate and salted caramel that salves any wounds I might have. I just wish it was served by Charles. ■