



diningout

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Squash blossoms with chorizo are a surprising and savory treat.
TOM CRUZE PHOTOS
SUN-TIMES

TO DIE FOR

Andersonville eatery Premise in good company

The best restaurants are usually built on a solid premise such as: You want to introduce the world to something new. You want to create a clean, well-lighted spot for people to gather. You want to reinvent yourself. Premise, a new modern casual but upscale restaurant in Andersonville, is built on all of these things and is thus pretty great.

That is to say Premise is thoughtfully constructed, not slapdash or cynical, a place the neighborhood needs but really doesn't have. These are also its burdens. At times the restaurant can be overwrought. The name itself, "Premise," feels like a philosopher's bong-born dream. The menu is divided not in to appetizers and entrees, but "prelude," "body" and "conclusion." And though "ethanol manipulator" is clearly much cooler, Premise's head bartender refers to himself as a "liquid engineer."

Also in delivering a thing the neighborhood needs, people believe Premise's owners took away something it already had. To build the restaurant, the owners closed the neighboring bar/lounge section of In Fine Spirits wine store, one of Chicago's better cocktail bars. The neighbors loved the affordability and conviviality of In Fine Spirits. (Take a look at the early vitriolic Yelp reviews of Premise and you'll see these folks are not suffering the shuttering quietly.)

But I think this anger is misplaced, for in Premise, very little is lost and much is gained. The upstairs "salon" still serves the nuanced balanced, thirst-quenching cocktails upon which In Fine Spirits built its reputation. The LastWord (Death's Door Gin, Luxardo Maraschino, Green Chartreuse and lime), for example, a dance of bitter green herb and luscious cherry satisfies serious cocktailians, while the Genever 75, an effervescent



A winning combination: Compressed melon topped with baby cucumber amid peppered buttermilk, arugula and candied peanuts.

citrus-kissed mash-up of Bols Genever, lemon, cava and Bitterman's orange bitter conquers those who like ice cubes in their white wine.

And downstairs there is now also a restaurant. Of course, Andersonville has no shortage of restaurants. But most of them are calibrated for the stroller-pushing or boutique-browsing set looking for organic pizzas or braised short ribs and a local arugula salad. Premise is the kind of spot An-



Premise's carrot cake is a daring, but successful dessert.

dersonville doesn't have much, if any of. Though, that's not to say, despite the heaviness outlined thus far, it is particularly fussy.

It's true, pick a random wine and the servers can espouse the virtues of its malolactic fermentation, but they'll also bring you a beautiful unbidden complimentary glass of sherry just because they think it complements the walnut flavors in the dessert.

Indeed the room at Premise is a stark exercise in modernist/Bauhaus monochrome with sharp high-backed chairs, black drum-shade pendant lamps and ebony wood tables. But there's also plenty of deco tile, exposed ducting and a chalkboard to keep things casual. Although, it should be said while lending some looseness, those surfaces also bring a hardness that four-star worthy spots like Alinea, L20 or Acadia tend to mitigate better with lush drapery, thick carpet or plump velvety clothed booths.



Premise is at 5420 N. Clark in Andersonville.

PREMISE ★★★

5420 N. Clark
(773) 334-9463;
premisechicago.com

Hours: (dining room) Dinner: 5 p.m. – 10 p.m. Tuesday – Sunday; closed Mondays. Brunch: 11 a.m. – 3 p.m. Sunday

Prices: Appetizers \$11-17; Entrees \$19-27; Dessert \$9

Try: Squash blossom, charred lobster, carrot cake

In a bite: High-end, modern, destination-worthy food and service comes to Andersonville.

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

I talk about Premise in such company because its food is that good. Chef Brian Runge, a veteran of Graham Elliot Restaurant, is, like Elliot, a nimble, tongue-in-cheek modern deconstructionist. But if that were all, he would mostly be a serviceable imitator. What's cool about Runge is that where most modernist cuisine is still often rooted in familiar gourmet paradigms, riffs on Caprese or Nicoise salad, and creme brulee bubbles or whatever, Runge is mining the deep American South and Latin America like no modernist really has.

I rarely order squash blossoms

because 99 percent of the time they're stuffed with goat cheese and tempura-fried. But Runge's are like squash beignets larded with spicy chorizo and creamy queso fresco, tempered by a piccalilli of blistered grilled corn and tiny, piquant house-pickled Serrano chili.

The Latin aesthetic extends to a flotsam and jetsam of succulent Cuban oregano-flecked charred lobster, crispy trunks of plantain, and marinated chanterelle mushroom florets, whose buttery funk mirrors and enhances the lobster's flavor. The grand richness of the plate is foiled by a swoosh of velvety peach preserve.

As for that Southern thing, there's compressed melon (vacuum packed to concentrate texture and flavor) roofed with crunchy circles of soothing baby cucumber perched over peppered moats of buttermilk lapping at the shores of a rocky arugula-strewn soil of candied peanuts. There are no interludes in Runge's version: It is all on one plate, sweet, spicy, soft, and crunchy. And gloriously, though inexplicably, it works.

Lake whitefish, a flaky perfect plank of the stuff, is more straightforward, accompanied by punchy acidic bits of green tomato and pickled okra and sharp tiny mustard greens. But even here there is a smart Southern detour in a thick slather of satisfying red-eye gravy studded with juicy bits of Benton's country ham.

Coffee also makes an appearance in a sweet chocolate/espresso crumble served alongside maple glazed Pork belly and persimmon beignets.



Executive chef Brian Runge displays Premise's charred lobster with tostones entree.

Though the hunk of pork is meltingly tender, the skin here is not crisp, and a bit slimy. One wishes for a deep fried chicharron-like counterpoint.

Desserts are just as daring as the savory stuff. None is better than a dish that looks the remains of a Peter Rabbit binge in the garden of Mr. McGregor — a maelstrom of pea tendrils, lightly sponged carrot cake, sour fromage blanc, sweet pea gelato, crispy orbs of freeze-dried pea and a rich dollop of honey-slathered honeycomb.

For those seeking chocolate lava cake or another tired s'mores interpretation, you'll have to suspend some disbelief. But once you do, you'll be rewarded with the best cheffy riff

on "peas and carrots" since Thomas Keller's lobster, peas and carrots at the French Laundry. Though I do think Runge could cut back on the size of the pea tendrils to maybe a short sprig or two. Chomping on a few of the longer stalks started to feel a bit like an exercise in vegan-friendly dental flossing. But things like this are minor, tiny refinements that if made might just award Premise a fourth star some day.

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