



# diningout

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# LESS IS MORE

Staff of Senza in Lake View gets creative in finding tasty ways to keep it gluten-free

They say a one-eyed man is king in the land of the blind. But do you consider a thing in the context of its limitation? Or do you ignore the limitation and judge absolutely? It's a legitimate question. But for Senza, a new gluten-free gourmet restaurant in Lake View, it's one you don't really need to consider, almost.

Senza (Italian for "without") is a pretty good restaurant in any context. In fact, you might consider its wheat-free status an advantage.

Constrained by the avoidance of wheat, the cooks at Senza have little choice but to pursue something unique. No better example can be found than in their bread. There is a history of using alternative flours in bread-baking, but without hard wheat, it is mostly a tear-stained past littered with unforgiving flours and grains and husky grasses like millet that offer structure, but little of the heavenly chew one associates with a great loaf.

The bakers at Senza are



The house bread — a gluten-free challenge without wheat — has a magnificent crackling crust with a soft, almost gooey crumb.

alchemists, merging tapioca, quinoa and other flours with a bit of xanthan gum (a natural carbohydrate emulsifier and thickener) to create a bread of magnificent crackling crust with a soft, almost gooey crumb. My server calls it a "baguette," but it is more like an ethereal corn-bread. Served warm and buttered, it has a heft and a satisfying nuttiness.

For my gluten-intolerant

friend (who I brought along for perspective, just in case), and who as a matter of survival turns away bread baskets like a Hubbard Street bouncer rejecting uncool patrons at a club, the loaf was the proverbial oasis. She may have stuffed half of our second loaf in a napkin and tucked it away in her purse for a breakfast fix. I ordered a second loaf after selfishly dusting off most of the first.



Lamb loin is dipped in thick lingonberry preserves and served with a dome of spicy horseradish at Senza, 2873 N. Broadway. | AL PODGORSKI-CHICAGO SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

Although, she got me back by sucking down a lot of a glorious parsnip and apple soup, a velvety sweet and savory puree adorned with buttery nuggets of tender lobster, crispy toasted pumpkin seeds, peppery micro-arugula and juicy, bursting, jewel-like orbs of pomegranate. If any dish belies the skill of Senza's chef, Noah Sandoval (a vet of Spring, Takashi and Schwa), this is the one. It would be at home in any of the best gourmet tasting menus in Chicago.

A seared lobe of molten foie gras served on a pedestal of

warm red onion and adorned with bracing frozen shavings of quince and a tangy drizzle of strawberry also would hang on similar menus.

A plate of whitefish, however, with its under-salted, over-cooked flesh served in tepid dashi broth, would not pass muster most anywhere.

But Sandoval's pillow "everything gnocchi" (a play on the beloved everything bagel) dusted in roasted crispy garlic, poppy, sesame and salt, dripping with the yolk of a freshly breached soft-boiled duck egg,

kicks the pants off most of the leaden versions served at Italian joints around town. Though, if any dish belied a gluten-free status, it was this one. The very best gnocchi are so light they almost evaporate on the tongue. Sandoval's has a bit of integrity that I imagine was unavoidable without a flour binder.

If it's pasta you crave, you're better off getting the tagliatelle. There is no compromise at all in the tender, almost scrim-like, truffle-perfumed sheets folded into a blanket that swaddles juicy, bursting roast cherry

tomatoes and sweet, funky chanterelle mushrooms. This is pasta of the gods, and, for my gluten-free friend, a godsend.

Lamb loin, too, a perfect medium-rare hunk dipped in thick lingonberry preserves and served with a dome of spicy horseradish is a smart antidote to the ubiquitous beef course. Most genius here is the tiny roast curl of grilled, melting, fatty lamb belly served between the hunks of lamb loin. That little bold bit of fat from Sandoval will do nicely to reward the bold gluten-intolerant.

Service is a bit of mixed bag. My food runner is an extraordinary encyclopedia of the techniques and ingredients used in the Senza kitchen, stalking us with answers every time a person in my party had a question. Our server, on the other hand, is confused about almost everything we ask. She also seemed to disappear every time we need to order another drink or require a new set of plates.

Speaking of drinks, the cocktails, especially the "Bourbon" — a whiskey elixir infused with mint, the sharp fizz of ginger



Senza's parsnip and apple soup is a velvety triumph that would be at home on Chicago's best gourmet tasting menus.

## SENZA ★★

2873 N. Broadway  
(773) 770-3527; senzachicago.com

**Hours:** Breakfast, lunch Tues.-Fri. 10:30 a.m. - 2:30 p.m., Sat. 10 a.m. - 2 p.m.; dinner Tues.-Sat. 5:30 p.m. - 10:30 p.m.

**Prices:** Shareable plates, \$8-30; dessert, \$8

**Try:** The bread! Apple and parsnip soup, tagliatelle

**In a bite:** Chicago's best gluten-free restaurant also happens to be a solid gourmet dining experience for those without wheat allergies.

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

beer and a long burn of thai chiles — is balanced and warming.

The room, too, with its glinting bulbs, hazy candlelight, honeyed woods and sharp, bright-white lacquer tables, is cozy. But I do have some quibbles. The bench-



The tagliatelle, bursting with roast cherry tomatoes and sweet, funky chanterelle mushrooms, will satisfy your pasta cravings.

style seating on both side of the rooms, while cute, is not particularly friendly to the lower back. Also, the chalkboard menu, which is the only location of the cocktail list, forces an awkward neck-craning if you're sitting at one of the tables beneath it.

Dessert is one of the unavoidable compromises at Senza. A semi-frozen nougat tastes like a second-rate semifreddo, and a grape sorbet, while shockingly fruity, is also oddly chewy. The intensely rich and bitter

chocolate cremeux scented with heady cardamom is fought over by all at my table, suggesting that the other desserts' limitations are more likely a function of an inconsistent pastry staff and not really a matter of being gluten-free.

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