



UNIQUELY FORAGED

Quirky Elizabeth both delights and confounds

Every once in a while a restaurant comes along that smacks you in the head. Elizabeth, a new Lincoln Square spot, from urban forager and former One Sister underground restaurateur Iliana Regan, is one of those restaurants.

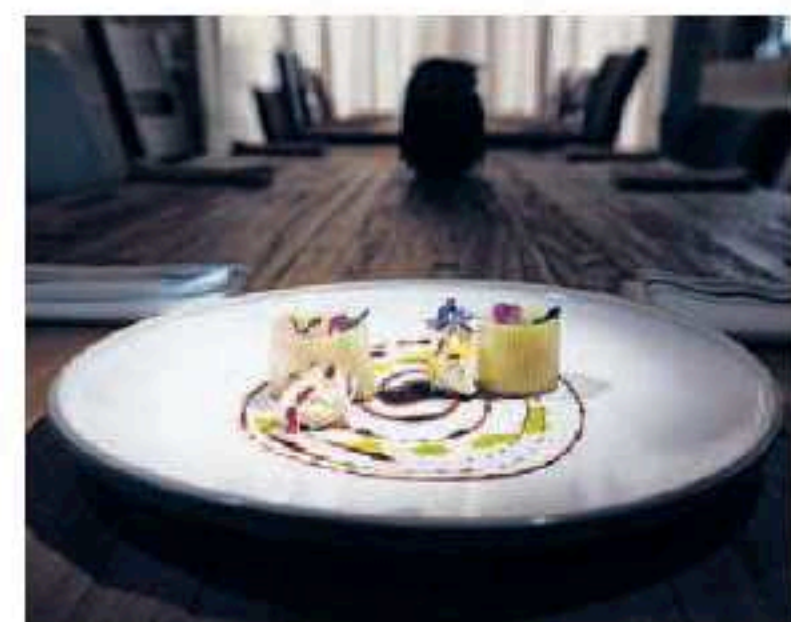
This is not just a metaphor. Mid-meal, on a trip to the restroom, a tile dislodged from the ceiling and fell on my head. I was not hurt. Though I tried to keep cool and say nothing, one of the servers noticed, came over and checked to see if I was OK. As for the metaphor, I have never been so delighted, intrigued, or confused by a restaurant as I have by Elizabeth (named in honor of Regan's late sister). I have seen idiosyncratic chefs, uncompromising cooks and original thinkers, but I have rarely experienced every one of those traits in one person like I do in Regan. She is brilliant. But like that errant ceiling tile, Elizabeth, her restaurant, is still a tad askew.

Memorable talent is ultimately always a little imperfect. Bob Dylan never had the greatest voice. J.K. Rowling is prone to adverbs. Kurt Cobain was never the best lyricist. Nirvana put out a record called "Bleach" that few would know if not for subsequent album "Nevermind." An hour of music, just like a 20+ course pre-fixe meal, takes practice to sustain. Elizabeth serves three prix fixe meals of varying sizes named



Hand Course: A La Quercia prosciutto roll is served to diners not on a plate, but rather in the crook of their fist.

Owl, Deer and Diamond — I had the longest, the Diamond. (Also, whereas I customarily visit a restaurant twice, I only visited Elizabeth once because of logistical constraints — they



Hamachi and fermented leeks are painted with a funky fish sauce caramel.

do not take reservations, but instead sell non-refundable tickets online.)

A listener endured the bleak grind of so many forgettable tracks on "Bleach," because there were hooks on "About a Girl" and impetus in a cut like "Blew." At Elizabeth there is also much impetus and many hooks. Silky cubes of Hamachi are ringed by fizzy, fermented leeks and painted with funky fish sauce caramel.

A tender tail of lobster is nestled in a crispy curl of brioche and coated in a velvety liver sauce and plated on a rusty bit of slate rock.

A salty roll of La Quercia prosciutto is served in the crook of

your fist. The service technique is thoughtful in that the striated sinew of the pork apes the fleshy bit of skin between your thumb and forefinger on which it is served.

"Terrariums" of malted brioche crumbs garnished with pickled blackberry, lemon and yogurt, hang like ornamental sculpture over the kitchen pass, beckoning like the culinary version of a Macy's Christmas window display. When they arrive, the brioche crackles in each bite like gourmet Grape-Nuts cereal.

Bright slivers of pickled foraged onion and celery foil a

sliver of rich deer heart well.

A heartwarming brew of duck pho is poured tableside into the cutest owl-face mugs, which feel like '70s relics from a fruitful thrift store binge.

A mignardise of beet marshmallow is sweet, but has an exciting root-veg funk that pairs nicely with a spicy housemade ginger chew.

But there is also plenty to trudge through, including a tyranny of cinnamon found in a shooter of "apple pie," which tasted like thin apple juice and in a glass of cider-spiced loup de mer and sunchoke. The fish was cooked well, but the cinnamon

made everything taste like a pack of Big Red. The sunchoke puree tucked into the narrow stem of the glass also was tough to reach.

A separate dish of custard had nice shavings of raw mushroom. But again, the perfume of cinnamon and the piney spice of juniper muscled out the delicate earthiness of that foraged fungus. (One distinct characteristic relative to other local restaurants is that so much of what Regan serves — who refers to her style on her blog as a "new gatherer's cuisine" — is foraged by her.)

A "pancake," more of a Dan-

ish aebleskiver, was raw in the middle. But cut back on the cinnamon, rethink the plating, cook the pancake longer, and these things are easily remedied.

What can't be fixed is an early progression of science-inspired food, a petri dish of flavorless gelee and dehydrated carrot served with an acerbic pipette of coca nib consommé. There was also a salad "sponge" of arugula topped with tangy goat cheese and sesame sorbets. The sorbets and a glorious dab of local honey were spectacular, but the sponge was monotonous and lacking flavor. The sponge could offer a nice textural contrast, but it

would be best served in tiny tufts, not one giant blob. (I use the "science" label not flippantly, but as a means of imparting the idea of the cold triumph of technique and theater over flavor.)

And Elizabeth in total is anything but cold. Wine director Scott Noorman is as effervescent as the sparkling Vouvray he serves. His verve and keen sense of food and wine pairing make him one of the best front-of-house guys in Chicago.

The dining room outfitted with birch bark, dried floral arrangements and snowfall-white walls feels more like a home than a dining room. In the



Chef Iliana Regan stands in the dining room of her often-inspiring Elizabeth Restaurant.



A whimsical terrarium with malted brioche crumbs garnished with pickled blackberry, lemon and yogurt hangs in the kitchen pass-through.



Beet marshmallow with ginger chew (mignardise) is sweet with an exciting root-veg funk.

foodie's chef, the cook equivalent to a minimalist composer like Philip Glass. Many journalists and diners have described her as ambitious, but that almost suggests a naivete of one who always is seeking things out of reach. In Regan, I see everything

as possible, even four stars. Someday. Just not yet.

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Lobster, Liver & Flowers is among the many winning courses on the fixed-price menu at Elizabeth Restaurant, 4835 N. Western. | RICHARD A. CHAPMAN-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS