



# diningout

BY MICHAEL NAGRANT email diningout@suntimes.com | Follow @michaelnagrant



The crispy-crust bread at Vera will set you back \$6, but the killer accompaniment of roasted garlic, duck crackling and goat butters make the dough worth the price.



Roasted shiitake and hen-of-the-woods mushrooms are served with a touch of thyme atop a creamy herb and mushroom sauce.



The escabeche — a crisp plank of succulent trout — gets a flavor boost from pickled celery and tender baby carrots.

# THE REAL DEAL

## Vera a refreshing touch of Spain in the West Loop

As a writer, there are things you have to cover and things you want to cover. Kith and Kin restaurant in Lincoln Park was one of those subjects that defied professional obligation. It became a lair that I relished in same the way that a thousand old Chicago journalists once revered the Billy Goat Tavern.

But greatness often burns its candle at both ends, and this year Kith and Kin imploded shortly after a furious chef/owner feud. With restaurants, the food and the room it's served in are highly perishable. When a favored restaurant shutters, devoted patrons just get burned. Thankfully, salvaging the loss of Kith and Kin, is Vera, a new Spanish-influenced restaurant in the West Loop.

I had an inkling Vera might be special. Even in this era of the fresh-faced celebrity-chefs, cooks are often still pirates. Most restaurant kitchens

run on guts, tenacity and muscle, not deep thought. Vera's chef/owner Mark Mendez (formerly of Carnivale) always struck me as the antithesis to all that. He seems deliberate and sensitive and his cooking is clean and nuanced.

At Vera, Mendez has given new life to this vision.

Take for example, the blood sausage — the moist, inky black morcilla nestled on a bed of honeycomb tripe so tender you mistake the offal strips for noodles. Or the olivada, an olive spread that lends a nutty, sumptuous bite to flaky black cod flanked by citrus-bursting mini-triangles of meyer lemon.

You might need a Spanish culinary dictionary to translate the menu, but by any name, the escabeche, a crisp plank of trout perked up with magenta-hued pickled celery and tender baby carrots from Genesis Growers in St. Anne, Illinois, is a tangy explosion of flavor.

Vera charges \$6 for their bread — surefire restaurant suicide! But, after one bite of that crispy crust and cloud-like, bubble-filled interior, I realize these are some of the best dollars I've ever spent. And that's before I dip the crust in the killer accompanying assortment

of roasted garlic, duck crackling and goat butters.

This bread is best paired with some of Vera's ruddy, white-fat-streaked Cinco Jotas cured pig shoulder. Though I know this sounds like the pining of a pretentious wine writer, the fat on the ham is redolent with acorn, and the meat has the most delightfully pungent funk. Such funk is well-paired with a glass of Terre Nere Nerello Mascalese, a Sicilian red featuring a wild, fermented-cherry top note. Mendez and his wife Elizabeth (the former wine director at Carnivale) have created one of the most fearless, affordable and food-friendly wine lists I've seen in a long time.

Saving money on wine allows me to splurge on the paella, a huge black saucer of saffron and garlic-infused al dente rice swaddling rare bits of juicy duck and rabbit. Paella is often heavy, but Mendez tosses in pickled peppers, whose acidity lifts the dish. My concern, and it should be noted, my *only* concern with Vera, is that though the rice is cooked properly, there are no extra-crispy bits at the bottom of the pan offering the textural contrast found in the most superlative versions.

Vera is not built on meat alone.

Though I am an unrepentant carnivore, my favorite dish here is a cazuela featuring buttery sweet-spiced squash puree coddling a pool of local honey and crispy bits of Marcona almonds. Coming in a close second is a mound of hen-of-the-woods and shiitake mushrooms perfumed with thyme and served over swooshes of roasted herb and cream-laden mushroom sauce.

Currently, Vera is light on dessert options, but that just provides more excuse to sample the incredible cheeses. My waiter breezily walks me through the characteristics of all nine cheeses on the menu. Props to him for steering us to the superb stinky raw-cow's milk Hooligan.

Though I haven't said much about the service, it is spectacular. On a separate visit, a waitress spits out wine knowledge like an IBM-engineered sommelier supercomputer.

With such a strong wine focus, Vera was originally supposed to be named Uva, a nod to the Spanish word for "grape." Because of potential trademark infringement, the name now honors chef Mendez's grandmother. (It should also be noted that "ver" is the latin root for "true.") I can think of nothing more

### VERA ★★★½

1023 W. Lake;  
(312) 243-9770; verachicago.com

Hours: Open 5 p.m. — 12 a.m.  
Tuesday-Saturday; 5 p.m. to 11 p.m.  
Sunday;

Prices: cheese and ham plates \$9-\$30; shared small plates \$4-\$26;

Try: Cinco Jotas ham, escabeche, squash puree, house-made bread, and paella.

In a bite: The ultimate neighborhood restaurant run by a caring husband and wife serving pitch-perfect, Spanish-inflected cuisine and incredibly affordable and quaffable wines with names you might not know, but flavor you won't forget.

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

apropos, for, Vera is without gimmicks. The dining room is stark, but warm.

Foremost, the Mendez's single-minded pursuit of what's good over what might attract diners makes Vera one of the truest restaurants I've ever eaten at in Chicago.

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



Chef Andy Fair slices the cured ham atop the bar at Vera restaurant. | RICHARD A. CHAPMAN