


diningout

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

SILVER SPOON

Au Cheval ups the ante on traditional diner fare



The General Jane's Korean-style chicken is double-fried, rendering a crispy crust that's quite similar to pork cracklin. The sauce is a splendid sesame-honey-spicy red pepper affair. | TOM CRUIZE - SUN-TIMES

It doesn't sound nearly as noble as "death by chocolate," but if you wanted to commit suicide by carbohydrates, there is no better place than Au Cheval, a new gourmet diner in Chicago's West Loop. In fact if you like food, like *really* like food (and this is an important distinction), there are few better places in Chicago. (The diner's name is roughly translated from the French as "on horseback.")

Survey the tufted leather banquettes, the stainless flattop bubbling over with fried eggs, the oversize mirrors, the bowling-alley-length Zinc bar and the bow-tie-shaped ceramic tile, and you might write off Au Cheval as some kind of cute pedestrian brasserie/greasy spoon hybrid, the kind of place you amble into a little tipsy at two in the morning, not so much seeking transcendent fare, but merely because it's there.

There's a familiar lonely heart's vibe here, sure, but there's also a futuristic frontier cantina thing going on. As with all the restaurants run by Brendan Sodikoff (Gilt Bar, Doughnut Vault and Maude's) there's a nice digital archive (aucheval.tumblr.com) detailing the painstaking effort behind the creation of the restaurant. To read the blog is to know that Au Cheval isn't some dilettante investor's hobby project or some chef's vanity effort. In some ways Au Cheval is much closer in ideology and effort to its neighbor, Next, the Alinea team's culinary time machine, than it is to any ubiquitous neighborhood grease pit.

If this sounds ridiculously eclectic, that's because it is. Owner Brendan Sodikoff started out with the idea of creating an upscale diner, and certainly there's a lot here that honors that tradition, from thin griddled, juicy pre-World War II-era burgers (rivaled locally only by maybe Schoops in Hammond or Edzo's in Evanston) to pillow-top-bun-wrapped fried bologna sandwiches dripping with Cheddar. But,



For dessert, the massive mille-feuille or Napoleon, is a decadent treat, with a buttery-sweet glazed, amber-colored "crust" and a luscious cream filling.



The foie gras and pork-stuffed cabbage is slow-braised and delicious.

there's Asian fried chicken and a huge pork porterhouse that rivals the gargantuan ribeyes at Gibson's. Few restaurants can be many things to many people, but, Au Cheval is a great unimpeachable date spot, a hipster refueling station late on weekends, and a Sunday evening pit stop for hip young families.

Wines at Au Cheval are chosen because they taste good, but also because, for example, the stony, mineral-rich, honeyed Assyrtiko/Aithiri blend from Domaine Sigalas is the result of an impossibly creative viticulture (the handpicked grapes for the wine grow on vines that are pruned to stay low to the ground to avoid becoming the victim of their growing environment — an inhospitable wind-whipped volcanic cliff).

The Horses Neck cocktail (which gets its name from a continuous swirl of lemon peel



The crispy potato hash with duck heart gravy is a delicacy not-to-be-missed at Au Cheval.

garnish that looks like broad rosy swath of a horse's neck) — a mix of tangy lemon, spicy rye, sharp ginger and an astringent dash of Angostura bitters can be traced it back to its late-19th century roots. If like me, you grew up in those days where your no-nonsense grandmother eschewed Mary Poppins' "spoonful of sugar" in favor of that time-tested cold remedy of lemon, whiskey and honey (aka the "toddler hot toddy").

If you're Jewish, the same might be said of Au Cheval's "matzah ball soup" a glorious softball-sized, cloud-light dumpling surrounded by a moat of golden chicken-fat-soaked broth.

This is Au Cheval's greatest conceit. You have a vague frame of reference for what you're eating, but almost none of these

dishes has really existed until now. Au Cheval's "stuffed cabbage" is nothing like the slimy packets of grayish rice-studded meat I grew up with. It is instead a glorious hunk of silky pork, larded with funky foie gras fat wrapped in a translucent scrim of caraway-perfumed, slow-braised cabbage.

General Jane's fried chicken is double-fried and features a shattering crust that's a kissin' cousin of a pork cracklin. It is as transcendent as any yardbird I've known. Sauced with a sesame seed-sprinkled honeyed spicy red pepper paste, it also kicks the stuffing out of my previous local Korean fried chicken fave, Crisp, in Lincoln Park.

It's possible I might have been unduly influenced by nostalgia, but I have never had duck heart, and yet Au Cheval's peppery duck heart in gravy-smothered hash was by far my favorite dish. Having run hundreds of pounds of spuds across a grater, having let those spuds rest for varying lengths, having dehydrated them and cooked them in different fats, I have not yet in my endless run of weekend breakfast experiments ever achieved the lacy crisps found here. So crisp, they stood up to the onslaught of a dollop of that thick velvety gravy for five minutes or so before they softened in the slightest.

And then there is the gigantic mille-feuille or Napoleon dessert, which my waitress dropped on the table and slashed in half with a very sharp knife as if she were throwing down some kind of gauntlet. It's buttery-sweet-glazed, amber-colored crust, only a slight but very important degree away from being burned, was a reminder of how too many pastry chefs undercook puff pastry. The delight of the devastating cream found between those layers comforted and cured the ills of what had been a pretty hard-won week for me.

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.