



BERNARD'S PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ELYSIAN HOTEL

## Love at First Bite

Eat your heart out at these romantic spots

BY LISA SHAMES

Matters of the heart can be very tricky. To help make it easier, we've put together a roundup of our favorite romantic spots in Chicago, from a luxurious haven for foodies to a cozy, new-on-the-scene bar with some options in between. We'll leave the rest to your, ahem, imagination.

West Loop's **SEPIA** (123 N. Jefferson St., 312.441.1920) is full of contradictions—it's rustic yet elegant, contemporary yet old-fashioned—and like a great opposites-attract kind of couple, it totally works. First there's the eye-candy décor of modern chandeliers, antique mirrors and floor-to-ceiling wine wall. The upfront lounge with its beautiful marble and walnut bar is a great to grab a pre-dinner cocktail. And then there's the food from chef Andrew Zimmerman, who takes the best seasonal ingredients and lets their pristine flavors shine through as his pan-fried trout with black-eyed peas and candied bacon proves.

The cozy interior of **SALUTE WINE BAR** (46 E. Superior St., 312.664.0100), inside a 19th-century building, makes us feel warm



OPPOSITE: Bernard's, tucked away inside the chic new Elysian hotel. ABOVE, FROM LEFT: Le Colonial has a sultry feel; cozy Salute is an ideal date spot.

and fuzzy. And that's before we've sampled a glass of wine from their all-Italian list or nibbled on brioche points with duck pate or artisanal cheeses and cured meats. Up the feel-good vibe and grab a spot on one of the cushy couches as you sip on housemade 'cello' (infused liquor) like blood orange or Meyer lemon. Now that's amore.

You don't have to speak French at the Gold Coast's **LE COLONIAL** (937 N. Rush St., 312.255.0088) but with its rattan chairs, louvered shutters and lush potted palms it's hard not to feel transported back to Vietnam circa mid 1950s. To take the fantasy further, head upstairs to the dark, sexy lounge with overstuffed sofas, vintage ceiling fans and large mahogany bar where you can nibble on crispy beignets stuffed with chicken and shrimp and sip on French wines.

Some protested the name of **L20** (2300 N. Lincoln Park West, 773.868.0002) when it first opened—it's a play on the chef's name, Laurent Gras, and H2O—but now the restaurant is recognized as *the* place for elegant seafood-focused cuisine in Chicago. Beyond what's on the plates—think peekytoe crab with avocado, kaffir lime and lemon oil; creamy salted cod with fingerling potato—is the sexy décor, including Macassar ebony columns, plush couches and white leather chairs. Sit back, relax and stay awhile with multi-course meals.

There's plenty to keep you busy inside the **ELYSIAN** (11 E. Walton St., 312.646.1300), a new luxury boutique hotel in the Gold Coast, including two beautiful restaurants and a 14,000-square-foot spa. But for a more intimate atmosphere, head to Bernard's on the second floor, a 34-seat bar filled with rich brown velvet couches and soft leather chairs. There the classic cocktails and oh-so-flattering lighting and charcoal nude sketches are sure to bring out the romantic in any one. ■