

Lounge Acts

For the hottest menus in town... belly up to the bar? By Lisa Shames

We love going out for lavish, multicourse meals as much as the next guy—OK, probably a lot more—but often, these days, we find ourselves craving something less formal, a casual destination where we can kick back with friends, relax... and also be a little closer to the bartender. Willing to sacrifice cuisine par excellence, however, we're not. Happily, we find ourselves in lockstep with the zeitgeist on this one: Increasingly, the city's best restaurants are evolving their lounge menus into mini-masterpieces. Goodbye shrimp cocktail, hello lamb tartare and short rib gyoza. ■



HOT PLATES The real draw at Mercat a la Planxa's lounge is the Catalan-inspired tapas.

Mercat a la Planxa

638 S. Michigan Ave., 312.765.0524.

In Spain, they take their late-afternoon snack very, very seriously, even bestowing upon it its own name: *merienda*. So when Mercat a la Planxa chef de cuisine Michael Fiorello set out to create the lounge menu for this hopping Catalan-inspired restaurant in the Blackstone Hotel, the pressure was on. He sought inspiration in the old-school tapas bars he'd come to adore on visits to Spain. The beneficiaries of his diligence? Hispanophiles who delight in these traditional small plates with a contemporary twist. Every day, from

3-5PM in the cozy downstairs lounge, you'll find a selection of beautiful Spanish cheeses and cured meats, including the prized *jamón Ibérico bellota*—ham made from the famous acorn-inhaling black Iberian pig—as well as hot tapas like seafood croquettes and octopus with potatoes. Wash it down with sangria and a specialty cocktail or two. Mercat—which made *Esquire's* list of best new restaurants last year—also offers daily specials, so take a peek in the glass display case on the bar for a preview. But if you're an addict dying to sneak one of the main dining room's delish steaks into the lounge, it doesn't hurt to ask, says Fiorello.



THE MAESTRO
L20's Laurent Gras at work.

L20

2300 N. Lincoln Park W., 773.868.0002.

By now, even gastronomic neophytes are aware of temple to rarefied seafood L20. But here's something most don't know: Those chic white leather chairs and Macassar ebony tables in the foyer are the perfect spot to taste brilliant chef Laurent Gras' new lounge menu. Try tiny triumphs like salmon sashimi with ginger, parsley and cantaloupe; or salted cod with smoked gelatin and caviar. Pair the bites with artisanal wines or a creative cocktail. Gras also turns out a *très bien* praline soufflé.

Moto

945 W. Fulton Market, 312.491.0058.

Moto executive chef Homaro Cantu isn't shy when it comes to describing his high-tech kitchen toys—which include lasers, liquid nitrogen and aromatic utensils. But it's a different story when it comes to the lounge menu at this avant-garde hotspot. “We don't advertise it,” says Cantu. “But if someone asks, ‘What do you have up here?’ we'll show them the lounge menu.” One of Chicago's best-kept foodie secrets includes a handful of savory dishes, desserts and an enticing selection of culinary-inspired cocktails. Beware: You'll never settle for par-for-the-course lounge fare again after you try Cantu's version of “hot buffalo wings.” The seared quail with braised celery, blue cheese sauce and a house-made chili oil comes with an edible printed picture of the dish... that mimics the same flavors.

Trader Vic's

1030 N. State St., 312.642.6500.

Shocker: The new Trader Vic's is undeniably kitschy. But in our quest for cool casual, there's no better beginning than tiki statues, tribal masks and palm trees. And we have to give 'ol Vic credit: By incorporating plenty of dark wood and low, sexy lighting into the décor, the whole island-meets-Gold Coast thing works nicely. The choice spot for your staycation is in the restaurant's 70-seat lounge, which boasts a long bar, cozy tables with cabana-style rattan chairs, and easy access to the tropical-themed cocktails. Try the classic Mai Tai or one of the dozens of other fruity drinks like the Siboney: dark rum, passion fruit, pineapple and lemon. Go on and pair either with the pupu platter—barbecue pork spareribs, crab rangoon and crispy prawns.



BIRDS OF A FEATHER
The Mai Tai and Potted Parrot at Trader Vic's.



One Sixtyblue

1400 W. Randolph St., 312.850.0303.

Hailed as one of Chicago's best restaurants since opening 10 years ago, one sixtyblue offers one of the city's most refined menus—but the lounge these days, while still oozing sophistication, has definitely let its hair down. Executive chef Michael McDonald knew he'd hit the mark on his new lounge menu with Kobe-stuffed chicken wing sliders after receiving a much-coveted fist pump from one sixtyblue partner Michael Jordan. "He

didn't say anything, but I knew it was all good," says McDonald. His crispy-on-the-outside/creamy-on-the-inside sauerkraut balls are similarly inspired. And then there are the fresh cocktails the kitchen team has been experimenting with, like the New Style White Russian—served with ice cubes made from cream, vanilla and Kahlúa. We also love the nibbles of fried pickles, sausage chips and spicy nut mix served to every table.

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Spring

2039 W. North Ave., 773.395.7100.

This beloved Bucktown institution has earned a slew of accolades for its subtle, Asian-inspired fare—but bon vivants looking for a relaxed destination shouldn't hold that against it. "We're not just a nationally recognized restaurant," says chef Shawn McClain. "We're a neighborhood restaurant that happens to be nationally recognized." That neighborhood vibe is especially present in the lounge, with its U-shaped, zig-zagging bar, creating cozy alcoves where it's easy to take in all of the action. On his mini-menu, McClain focuses on cocktail-friendly dishes—fun, inventive food you don't have to think twice about. Translation: short rib gyoza, mussels with bacon, and tuna sashimi with quail egg. But our favorite, as well as one of McClain's, is the pork belly steamed bun, which pairs perfectly with a Geisha—Spring's sake vodka gimlet.



Lockwood/Potter's

17 E. Monroe St., 312.726.7500.

We admit that, sitting in the lobby of a national landmark hotel, surrounded by 24-karat gold Tiffany chandeliers, bronze winged angels and no less than 21 Grecian frescoes on the ceiling, it's hard to be disappointed no matter *what* comes out on the plates. But Lockwood executive chef Phillip Foss doesn't seem to be intimidated by all of the historic décor to be found at the Palmer House Hilton—even after its recent \$170-million renovation. (Ditto for über-hip new lounge Potter's, with its inspired décor nodding back to the Empire Room's glory days, and where Foss's menu is also served.) Foss knows the secret to amazing lounge food, no matter where guests find themselves, is lively, accessible fare that pairs well with stiff drinks. So on his lounge menu, served from 11am to midnight, you'll find mini-Kobe sliders on brioche buns, crispy duck legs with a balsamic vinegar/brown sugar glaze, and a fantastic do-it-yourself bruschetta. And if you get sleepy after dessert (Bertha's famous brownie is a winner) or a drink (Foss is a big fan of the Scotch selection), you can always check into a suite. ■

