

Dish It Out

A brunch Renaissance, tasty tapas and chic fried chicken rule local menus | By Lisa Shames |

NO BULL

With its 42 inch plasma TVs, 36 foot stock ticker and five booths with personal pay as you go beer taps, we can see why, after the clock hits five, there's a constant stream of good looking men headed into new bar Bull & Bear (trust us the spot is across the street from our office). But with all the focus on beer taps and cute bankers, it's easy to overlook that B&B also offers a seriously good menu. Head chef David Blonsky, a Culinary Institute of America grad, has worked at award winning restaurants think Trio, TRU, Spago and, in dishes like his grilled ginger soy skirt steak, it shows. We chat with the Glencoe native:

What attracted you to this job? I've worked in four star restaurants my whole life and I really liked the styling of the food and working with different types of food. But what I really wanted to do was work at a restaurant where I would get repeat customers who wanted simple, gourmet food. This place nailed it. **What are the most popular dishes?** Our Asian barbecue style wings are huge sellers. We just won the exotic wings division at Wing Fest. There are about 20 components within the sauce. **Any tips on how to snag a tap table?** If you call on a Monday, you can get a table for the weekend. By Wednesday, though, they're pretty much booked. 431 N. Wells St., 312.527.5973, bullbearbar.com.



Head chef David Blonsky at Bull & Bear.

THE BIRD'S THE WORD

Fried chicken may have a bad rep as the king of drive thru cuisine, but when it's not served in a bucket, it can hit surprisingly gourmet heights. At these four restaurants, you'll get more cluck for your buck with jazzed up versions of the classic Southern dish.



TASTE TEST

The Gage's fried chicken liver appetizer.

THE GAGE Exec chef Dirk Flanigan has a confession to make: As a kid, he didn't like liver. Now, it's a different story. To make the restaurant's fried chicken liver appetizer, he soaks livers from Amish chickens (thought by many to have better flavor) overnight in buttermilk to soften their iron taste, and coats them with rice and all purpose flours to give the app some extra crunch. Spicy mustard adds the extra zip. 24 S. Michigan Ave., 312.372.4243, thegagechicago.com.

TABLE FIFTY-TWO Go ahead, use your fingers. Chef Art Smith's fried chicken is crispy, yet greaseless. But good luck getting some: Not only is it available just on Sundays and Wednesdays, but the recent visit by the Obamas, as well as Smith's BFF status with Oprah, make getting reservations nearly impossible. As in, we called last November and couldn't get in until January 6. 52 W. Elm St., 312.573.4000, tablefiftytwo.com.

WEST TOWN TAVERN If you're one of the many fans of chef/co owner Susan Goss' Monday night only fried chicken, you have her employees to thank. After a staff meal, they managed to convince Goss the dish would be a big hit with diners, too. Add sautéed Swiss chard, a buttermilk biscuit and wild mushroom gravy, and it's no surprise that about half of each Monday's guests order the bird. 1329 W. Chicago Ave., 312.666.6175, westtowntavern.com.

MARKETHOUSE The way exec chef Scott Walton sees it, the world doesn't need another grilled chicken sandwich. So for his lunch menu, he went glam with a panko crusted fried chicken sammie. The spices in the super crispy chicken breast (caraway, cumin, paprika) pair perfectly with the creamy, house made cole slaw. Finger licking good, indeed. 611 N. Fairbanks Ct., 312.224.2200, markethousechicago.com.

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NOSH NEWS



Tapas Valencia's roasted garlic shrimp



Frozen yogurt from Yogen Früz.



June's farm-fresh egg on bricche.

SPANISH ACQUISITION Sibling to Naperville's Meson Sabika and formerly located in Bloomingdale, Tapas Valencia has hit the South Loop. Kick back in a cushy brown leather booth to order traditional hot and cold small plates—stuffed piquillo peppers, jamón Serrano—plus paellas, sangria and plenty of direct from Spain wines. 1530 S. State St., 312.842.4444, tapasvalencia.com.

SPOON IT Pinkberry may have caused traffic jams in L.A., but here it's Canadian import Yogen Früz that's looking to win the fro yo war. Dishing up blended yogurt in flavors like kiwi and peach, we'll see if its toppings top Red Mango's. 303 W. Madison Ave., 312.332.3789; coming soon: 333 S. State St. and 843 W. Belmont Ave.

JUNE BUG After hearing the buzz behind June, a new farm fresh spot in Peoria Heights, we were bitten by the urge to take a road trip. Three words: worth the drive. Chef Josh Adams takes advantage of his close ties with farmers to create a seasonal ingredient driven menu at a surprisingly sleek spot. 4450 N. Prospect Rd., Suite S1, Peoria Heights, 309.682.5863, junerestaurant.com.

ON A ROLL Get both sushi and spring rolls in a sexy new dining room at Chinese/Japanese restaurant Shine (formerly Shine Morida), which just moved to new digs at Webster Avenue and Halsted Street. Expect exposed brick walls and glass doors that open to a chic patio. 756 W. Webster Ave., 773.296.0101, shinerestaurant.com.

FIRED UP Logan Square just got hotter: The team behind Arlington Heights' Fuego Mexican Grill & Margarita Bar has launched a similar concept with the same name in the 'hood. 2047 N. Milwaukee Ave., fuegomexgrill.com.

Diners share plates at Pintxos, a new tapas spot from the Café Ibérico team.

NEW SPOT!



X MARKS THE SPOT

Just when you thought you had tapas down pat, along comes River North's Pintxos to show that there's more to Spanish small plates than *patatas bravas*, baked goat cheese and jamón. From the same crew that first introduced us to Spanish food 17 years ago at Café Ibérico, this restaurant in a restaurant—it's located upstairs—focuses on the Basque region of northern Spain. That's where you'll find, says owner Jose Lagoa, the restaurant's namesake *pintxos* (pronounced 'pinchos'), which are tiny skewers of grilled and raw meats and fishes (from lamb to salmon) accompanied by complementary sauces and garnishes. Heartier appetites can opt for garlic chicken legs and wings, or Spanish tortillas (the potato and egg pie that gets an upgrade here with customizable additions like bacon and red peppers). But no matter what you choose, you'll want to pair it with *txatos*, small pours of Spanish wine. Looks like learning new tricks isn't so difficult after all. 737 N. LaSalle St., 312.664.4800.



Ajasteak in the Dana Hotel and Spa.

EARLY BIRD SPECIALS

With new brunch menus popping up at some of the city's trendiest spots, our favorite meal is (finally!) getting the attention it deserves. It's also challenging chefs to create food that is both comforting and innovative. Here are a few places that are making it easier for us to rise and shine.

AJASTEAK

No, there is nothing religious about Ajasteak's new "Sunday School" brunch—except, of course, our devout worship of sinfully decadent dishes such as the XXXL (translation: 16-inch diameter) milk chocolate and caramelized banana pancakes, Wagyu beef stew and eggs benedict with house-made English muffins. If those don't make you a believer, perhaps the roving Bloody Mary and mimosa cart hallelujah! will. 11AM-3PM. 660 N. State St., 312.202.6050, ajasteak.com.

THEORY

In theory, the last place you want to find yourself on a Sunday morning after a night of partying is a bar. But River North's Theory, an upscale sports lounge with cushy oversized dark leather booths, might just disprove that. Decide for yourself over made-to-order doughnuts, cinnamon apple pancakes and eggs with lobster and crab. You won't go thirsty either, with \$5 prosecco mimosas and plenty of craft beers on draft. So much for that, well, you know. 10:30AM-3PM. 9 W. Hubbard St., 312.644.0004, theorychicago.com.

HEARTY BOYS CATERING/HBTV

You can take the boys out of the restaurant, but you can't take the restaurant out of the boys. Or at least that's the case with Steve McDonagh and Dan Smith, aka The Hearty Boys. After closing their namesake eatery, the duo decided they just couldn't live without brunch and opened up their catering space/cooking school on Sundays to hungry fans of their sassy home cooking. We're ordering pulled pork hash and eggs, cardamom waffles and Tang mimosas. 9AM-2PM. 3819 N. Broadway, 773.244.9866, heartyboys.com.

SHAW'S CRAB HOUSE

Newfangled brunches are great, but sometimes we crave something old school. Enter Shaw's Crab House with its new hotel-style Sunday brunch. A make-your-own-omelet station, carving station with beef tenderloin and turkey, Bloody Mary and mimosa bar, and seafood bar with oysters, sushi and Alaskan king crab is just the beginning. Finish with plenty of pie and chocolate cake. Stretch pants not included. 10:30AM-1:30PM. 21 E. Hubbard St., 312.527.2722, shawscrabhouse.com. ■