

# FLYING HIGH

Chef Noah Sandoval reappears in the West Loop at tiny Oriole, hewing close to pure flavors and showing how 15-course dinners can still dazzle.

By Lisa Shames

Photography by Anthony Tablier

It sounds like one of those crazy *Top Chef* challenges: Create an elegant and delicious multicourse gluten-free meal that—here's the catch—no one would know is gluten-free. And while you're at it, throw in some pasta and bread too. Not only did chef Noah Sandoval do all that while at Lakeview's Senza; he earned a Michelin star in the process. After a meal at that now-closed restaurant, one couldn't help but wonder what Sandoval could do without the ingredient restriction.

Plenty, as it turns out. At Oriole, a charming 28-seat spot in the West Loop, Sandoval, who also worked at Schwa, offers a tasting menu that serves as a wonderful reminder of why this type of dining—time commitment and high price tag notwithstanding—still matters. Talented company helps: Award-winning Pastry Chef Genie Kwon (Boka, Eleven Madison Park) is a partner, and Sandoval's wife, Cara, another Senza vet, runs the front of the house. There's also star power on the beverage side with former Intro sommelier Aaron McManus.

Before you can experience all Oriole has to offer, though, you first have to find it. That might involve convincing your taxi driver that, yes, there really is a restaurant at the end of that desolate street. If that doesn't persuade him, perhaps Oriole's hostess waving at you from outside the restaurant—in the rain, no less—will. Regardless, I predict that soon enough, plenty of people will join the cognoscenti in knowing exactly where Oriole is located.

The intrigue continues inside, as that helpful hostess bends down to lift the door of an industrial elevator car, which you then pass through to enter. Oriole's a serene, pretty space with two long gray banquettes on either side of the small room and a smattering of white tablecloth-covered tables in the middle. Decor is limited—a few modern light fixtures here; minuscule flower vases there. But odds are



**FLOWER POWER** From top: Alaskan king crab with cara cara navel pieces, spring onion and edible flowers; all the 28 seats at Oriole offer a terrific view of the open kitchen and its chefs.

your attention will be focused on the far end of the room where the partially glass-enclosed white-tiled kitchen is located. There you can watch Sandoval and his team of chefs calmly prepare the 15 or so courses that you'll soon be eating. And once you're served, thinking about what is or isn't decorating the room won't be your most pressing thought.

Rather, you'll want to know where that subtle hint of smoke in the caviar-topped Scottish langoustine comes from (that would be the torched lardo wrapping the firm shellfish, I was told). It's only one bite, but, boy, what an incredible impression it makes—and it's followed by many more.

Next up is a black shallow bowl delicately layered with thin slices of *jamon Iberico de Bellota*, crunchy black walnuts, pickled mustard seeds and bits of Campo de Montalban, a Manchego-like cheese. Even the most traditional Spaniards would approve of the way their prized jamon is gussied up while still respecting what makes it so great in the first place.

It's by about the fourth course—a lovely ceramic bowl filled with chunks of sweet Alaskan king crab, cara cara orange pieces and edible flowers all resting in a light spring onion cream sauce—that I become aware of how terrific the beverage pairings are here. Sure, Champagne and a wonderful Junmai Ginjo sake have already passed through, but it's the 2014 Domaine Weinbach CONTINUED...





Slagel Farms lamb belly course, I played a game with myself to see how small a bite I could take of the tender meat and still get that rich, earthy flavor. Answer: very small. “My philosophy is that every ingredient should taste as much of itself as it can,” says Sandoval. Good idea.

Another theme is the seamless flow from one course to the next. And that goes for dessert too, which starts with a pineapple-sorbet lollipop of sorts presented in a Lucite box to cleanse the palate, before moving on to a lovely chocolate and goat yogurt dish that looks like it’s wrapped in a thin sheet of burlap, which is followed by an all-white chicory custard with a hint of whiskey. To finish? A still-warm mini almond croissant with notes of cardamon, rose and acacia honey.

At this point, I was full—but not overly stuffed as sometimes happens with lengthy tasting menus. I found myself jealous of the couple next to me just starting their culinary journey—so much so that I wanted to lean over and tell them of all the great things to come. But I didn’t want to spoil all the fun surprises.

“I’m living the dream,” says Sandoval, who adds that he hired people he can learn from as well as teach. “I feel so lucky,” he says.

He’s not the only one.



**FISH TALE** Clockwise from top left: Icelandic steelhead trout with smoked roe paired with a fish-bone broth; the first of 15 courses is Scottish langoustine with caviar, white asparagus and torched lardo; chef-partners Noah Sandoval and Genie Kwon.

...CONTINUED Clos des Capucins riesling that really turns my attention to the synergy going on between what’s on the plate and in my glass.

And I’m not even halfway through my dinner.

There’s a skewer of Icelandic steelhead trout that’s grilled on binchotan charcoal until it’s just barely cooked. It’s paired with a bowl of funky fish broth studded with microherbs, mushrooms and trout roe. I dare you not to smile when those fish eggs pop in your mouth revealing their sea-flavored liquid.

Smiling is, in fact, something that happens a lot at Oriole, and not just from the diners when they, say, spread the creamy housemade butter on a slice of baked-in-house sourdough bread or when the cheese course arrives on a crisp thin cracker looking like something out of a fairy tale. Servers seem to be having a terrific time too, and it shows.

If there’s a running theme through all these diverse dishes, it would be the purity of flavors that come through loud and clear. During the

**ORIOLE**

661 W. Walnut St., 312.877.5339, oriolechicago.com

Dinner: Tue.-Sat.

Tasting menu: \$175

Beverage pairings: \$75 (wine, beer and cocktail), \$125 (wine only)