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C-HOUSE



C-Worthy

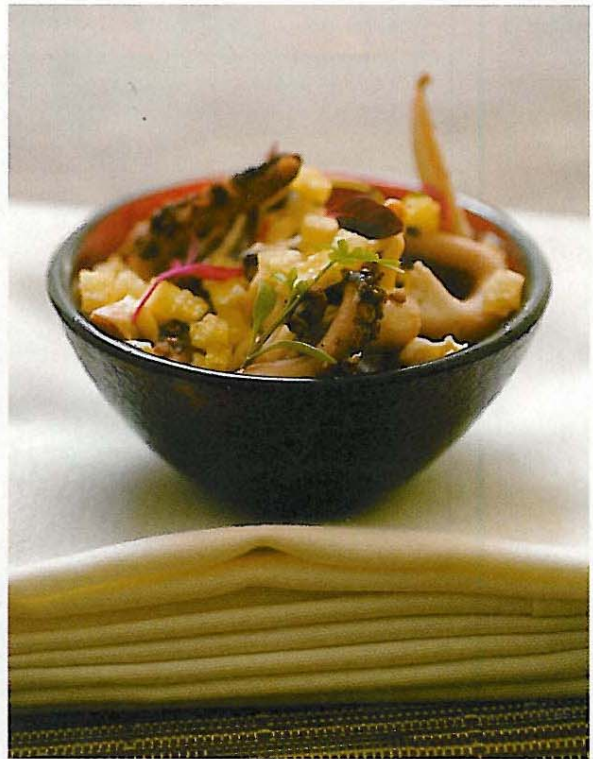
Splashing onto the scene, sleek C-House is making waves with its innovative seafood dishes

| By Michael Nagrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier |

After an early course onslaught of small plates of raw and lightly cured seafood at celeb chef Marcus Samuelsson's new nautical-inspired C-House, I threw one arm around a back-soothing throw pillow, slunk down in the low banquette, and almost kicked my feet up and lit a smoke. This satiety was inspired by luscious bite-sized pieces of pastrami-cured and dill-brightened salmon belly; a salty, crispy-skinned sardine perched on a raft of toast swimming in a quail egg yolk pond; and precious ruby-fleshed rare tuna planks glistening with a wash of briny toasted rice vinaigrette.

This precision and gourmet inspiration brought to all the sushi style fish preparations on C-House's "C-Bar" starter menu was like the culinary lovechild of celebrated sushi-master Nobu Matsuhisa and chef Daniel Boulud. Until then I'd held L20, which serves similar items, as the local standard for this kind of plate. But the C-Bar items were more satisfying and in some cases a tenth of the price of those at L20. It says a lot about C-House chef and co-owner Seth Siegel-Gardner that the least impressive part of the selection, though still a very tasty part, was a luscious Wagyu beef tartar.

Relativity like this popped up throughout the meal,



which continued with a delicious aorta-clogging block of foie gras paired with smoked sturgeon. I love foie gras so much that when Chicago initially banned it, I drove to Montreal to dine on a five-course tasting at Au Pied de Cochon. And yet, I barely touched my lush serving of it once C-house's pork belly arrived at my table. The plate featured silky pork chunks and an oozy poached duck egg enrobed in curry- CONTINUED...

Just as surely as a scantily clad women stumbling from a steamy shower is going to get knocked off in a horror film, I assumed that a chic, nautical-vibed restaurant helmed by a celebrity chef who doesn't even live here isn't going to be good. I was wrong.

...CONTINUED perfumed hollandaise resting on a bed of tender braised greens. The greens were swimming in a sweet spiced por liquor that was so good I would have done shots of it later at the bar.

Bathed in the golden light cast from fishbowl-shaped copper light fixtures reflecting off honey laminate wood walls (think IKEA with money), and surrounded by the chatter of frizzy-haired Midwestern moms replenishing after a Mag Mile shopping spree and beautiful locals on double dates, I'm actually surprised to be having one of the better meals I've had all year. Just as surely as a scantily clad woman stumbling from a steamy shower is going to get knocked off in a horror film, I assumed that a chic and super-sleek restaurant serving seafood and chops helmed by a celebrity chef who doesn't even live here isn't going to be great. I was wrong. Even though he spends most of his time running his restaurant Aquavit in New York, Samuelsson's famous style of elevating cuisine tied to his heritage—in this case the seafood of his Swedish childhood—is certainly on display at C-House.

Then came the skate: Maybe Gordon Ramsay, the foul-mouthed, ass-kicking kitchen dictator of TV's *Hell's Kitchen*—who Siegel-Gardner worked for as a sous chef at The London in New York City before coming to Chicago—really is, as he protests, a pussycat. How else can you explain the C-House skate wing entrée, a flaccid fan-shaped filler flanked by spoiled caviar whipped crème fraîche curdled into a mashed potato-like glop? After one bite of the desiccated dish, I gingerly deconstructed the wing with a fork, as if it were about to squirt poisonous blowfish toxin. If Ramsay were really the fire breathing, hot-risotto-throwing maniac he appears to be, Gardner never would have allowed this dish to happen. The legacy of working for a life-threatening megalomaniac is that even after you've left their nest, years later you'll still be driven by cold-sweat nightmares of letting them down.

The reason my inner Ramsay comes out now is that until this moment the entire meal had been delicious. But the next entrée, fish and chips, quickly put me back in a non-Ramsay-like happy place: A soul-satisfying dose of crispy comfort, the thinly battered flaky cod nuggets demonstrated finesse in tune with the early part of my meal. (Just as Andre Soltner, the famed former chef of Lutece, believed he could learn everything he needed



HAUTE PLATES *Top:* The lobster club is served with bacon brioche, avocado and C-House fries. *Above:* The tiny fish tacos, made with marinated yellowtail pack in some amazing flavor.

to know about a chef from how they cooked a simple omelette, fish and chips is a similarly perfect litmus test for a seafood restaurant.)

Despite one unfortunate dish mixed in with the excellent ones, the enchanting small plates like the pork belly ensure I'll make a repeat visit, and the C-Bar bites have me reconsidering whether I'll ever eat traditional sushi again. Even the skate dish wasn't a conceptual failure. If the caviar had been fresh and the skate cooked on point, it would have been good. If Siegel-Gardner can reign in execution on these fine points, I imagine in a few years, he'll be regarded like his mentors Samuelsson and Ramsay. On behalf of line cooks who spend their days ducking scalding copper pots in kitchens across America, I sure hope he chooses to model his leadership style on the former. ■

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RATING: ★★★½

166 E. Superior St. in the Affinia Chicago Hotel, 312.523.0923.

What the stars mean: 1 = fair, some noteworthy qualities; 2 = good, above average; 3 = very good, well above norm; 4 = excellent, among the area's best; 5 = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambiance and service.

WHAT TO WEAR: *Friendly to hotel guests, everything from Jimmy Choos in the dining room to Jellies in the lounge are in play.*

WHAT TO ORDER: *Salmon pastrami, Poached Duck Egg and Pork Belly, Chef's Selection of 15 snacks from the Candy Bar dessert menu.*

WHEN TO GO: *Dinner is booked a week or so out on weekends, but weekdays are always walk-in friendly.*

WHAT TO KNOW: *Arrive early and throw down a couple of cocktails in the bar area or drink in the arresting city views at the C-View lounge on the 29th floor.*

WHO GOES: *Hotel guests, Sex and the City-ites and Loop happy hour holdovers.*

WHAT IT COSTS: *Appetizers \$2-\$16; entrees \$19-\$45; desserts \$2-\$12.*

SMOOTH SAILING *Clockwise from top left:* Artic Char with sunchoke purée and green grapes; the bar area at C-House; one of the incredible options of raw fish; octopus with crispy potato and spicy mayo.

