

# C-House's seafood-plus menu: 2 stars

## Marcus Samuelsson's Chicago restaurant

By Phil Vettel | Chicago Tribune critic **October 2, 2008**

Marcus Samuelsson, the much-decorated chef of Aquavit restaurant in New York, sounds like a humble beginner when discussing his latest effort, C-House restaurant in Chicago.

"We're a brand-new restaurant in a fantastic food city," Samuelsson says. "It takes a while to become established, and we know that."

And so C-House opened last June in the Affinia Hotel with aw-shucks, toe-twisting-in-the-sand modesty. Just another neighborhood restaurant trying to make friends.

Samuelsson has an undeniably compelling personal history (adopted from Ethiopia in the midst of a tuberculosis epidemic, raised in Sweden, the youngest chef to capture three stars from the [New York Times](#)), but you won't hear it promoted at C-House. The chef's name isn't on the menu.

Call it a refreshing case of truth in non-advertising, because Samuelsson, despite his intense involvement in C-House's concept and design, isn't on the premises much, if at all. The executive chef is Seth Siegel-Gardner, an Aquavit veteran who also worked under Gordon Ramsay.

As the name suggests (pronounce it "sea house" and it all makes sense), C-House is mostly about fish. Indeed, Samuelsson says the entire concept can be discerned with just a single bite of the fish taco, a raw-bar nibble that has become C-House's signature. It's just a tiny, crispy-shell taco, but when filled with ceviche-style hamachi, offering hints of fresh citrus, olive oil and spices, it's just a short bite of perfection.

The raw bar offers the usual tiered seafood platters, and I was generally happy with my shellfish assortment, though the mussels were not at their best. I'd forgo the lot to spend more time with the other raw-bar nibbles, \$3 to \$6 plates that include a wagyu tartare crowned with quail egg, pristine slivers of cobia alongside whipped coconut puree, mild curls of pastrami cured salmon with caramelized cream cheese and sticks of seared tuna splashed with citrus vinaigrette, over toasted rice.

Siegel-Gardner will throw a meaty surprise out there now and again—the nicely charcoaled skirt steak was delicious, and the fork-tender suckling pig with peach chutney and lacquered skin was a revelation—but large plates are mostly finny and very good, particularly seared tuna with black olive couscous and sea urchin foam.

Small-plate dishes are fun. I particularly liked the poached duck egg, agreeably runny, alongside rich pieces of pork belly with a sweet mustard glaze. Ricotta- and arugula-filled ravioli failed to live up to our waiter's strong recommendation.

I liked the desserts, which are so seasonal that most of what I sampled has moved off the menu (that's a good thing). There also are assorted candy treats, sold by the piece, kind of a dessert version of the raw bar. The candy-bar cookie sandwich and marshmallow-center chocolate pyramid are good bets.

The narrow dining room is clad in rich, honey-toned wood and features a long front bar with a few low-level cocktail tables and chairs, two bar-height tables dedicated to communal seating and a main dining area with black-and-white nautical photographs and generously spaced tables.

You must make time to visit the 29th-floor rooftop bar, where glass panels foil the wind and beautiful people lounge in chairs and couches. The view is spectacular (the surrounding buildings, I mean), and one gets the sense of being in a restaurant that's in love with the city. It shouldn't be long before the feeling is mutual.