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Eat, Stay, Live

Fantastic hotel restaurants make us want to check-in and stay awhile

BY BARBARA REVSINE

Chicago has a long tradition of excellent hotel restaurants, and the current lineup makes for some of the city's hottest dining options. Heading the list are Ria and Balsan in the new, super-luxe Elysian Hotel, Sable adjacent to the newly opened Hotel Palomar Chicago, Mercat a la Planxa in the refurbished Blackstone and Pelago in the recently renovated Raffaello Hotel. and.

SABLE (505 N. State St., 312.755.9704) in River North's Hotel Palomar showcases the considerable talents of chef Heather Terhune. The focus is on American cuisine with a nod to our diverse heritage—expect interesting flavor profiles, a plethora of small plates and a lively bar scene in the sleek, contemporary space. Root beer-braised bison sliders topped with crispy onions, and seared scallops paired with a warm tomato chutney made with a Madras-style curry paste exemplify the game plan, as does the phyllo-wrapped Reuben. (Insider tip: don't skip any accompanying dipping sauces!) Desserts, including a heavenly butterscotch pot de crème served in French canning jars and house-made whoopee pies, are definite must-haves.



OPPOSITE: Inside Mercat a la Planxa's energetic dining room. ABOVE, FROM LEFT: Shaved foie gras with pumpernickel, preserved plum and tatsoi at Ria; an inside view of Sable.

The mood is Paris, the décor is a sophisticated study in black, white and gray, and the cuisine in both restaurants in the Elysian Hotel is superb. **BALSAN** (11 E. Walton St., 312.646.1300), the more casual of the two, is open throughout the day, while **RIA** only does dinner. Executive chef Jason McLeod oversees both venues. Drawing on the varied cuisines of the countries bordering the Mediterranean, Balsan takes diners on a culinary adventure that begins with breakfast. The poached eggs are served with shaved prosciutto and the breakfast sandwich pairs chorizo with goat cheese. Lunch is a mix of small and large plates, some of them, like the pizza Margherita and the tarte flambée, prepared in the wood-fired oven. Dinner offers similar diversity, ranging from a burger topped with onion marmalade to a rib eye steak with bordelaise sauce. Balsan and Ria are positioned on either side of a shared lounge with an energetic vibe, and there's a perceptible mood shift when you enter Ria. The pace is slower, the ambience more subdued, and the noise level muted, much as it should be in a restaurant of this caliber. While the options lean toward fish, with an emphasis on more esoteric options like sturgeon and St. Pierre, dry-aged rib eye and Peking duck are also up for offer and round out the seasonal, globally influenced menu.

At **MERCAT A LA PLANXA** (638 S. Michigan Ave., 312.765.0524) in the newly renovated Blackstone Hotel, the cuisine is Spanish and the décor, with vaulted ceilings and open kitchen, pays homage to famed architect Antonio Gaudi. Chef Michael Fiorello and executive chef Jose Garces (of *Iron Chef* fame) give diners an opportunity to sample a wide range of dishes, many of them, like Gaudi, native to Catalonia.