

BITES

Restaurant Review: Balsan, in Chicago

By ELAINE GLUSAC
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Most hotel restaurants seem to fall into one of two camps: basic providers, serving B.L.T.'s and [pastas](#), and those with name-brand chefs, which play it relatively safe and where the celebrated namesake is rarely at the stove. This French-inflected brasserie in the new Elysian Hotel in [Chicago](#) charts a different course, offering dishes like house-made headcheese and veal-heart [salad](#) (below).

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Sally Ryan for The New York Times

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During a recent visit, those pears were the pleasantly sweet partner to silky veal heart, finely shaved like roast beef and draped among sturdy greens. The kitchen's affection for offal shows up again in a poached egg appetizer richly complemented by truffled mushrooms and chicken liver. In a wood oven, [Balsan](#) turns out whole chicken (it takes 45 minutes to prepare), as well as savory tarte flambée: smoky chopped bacon and nutty, Gruyère-like Pleasant Ridge Reserve cheese on a thin crust. The creamy crème brûlée is topped with seasonal fruit, which, in winter, was house-canned cherries.

The understated space features gray marble tables with pinstripe runners, black leather armchairs and a marble bar spanning the length of the room. An etched-glass wall behind the bar and votive candles add sparkle. On a recent Saturday night, the well-coiffed crowd, a mix of Gold Coast residents and hotel guests, filled all 70 seats — despite the restaurant's hideaway location on the hotel's third floor, with no street-level sign.

Balsan, Elysian Hotel, 11 East Walton Street; (312) 646-1400; [balsanrestaurant.com](#). Average dinner for two, without drinks or tips, costs about \$80.

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With a menu both daring and satisfying, the chef Jason McLeod and his staff aim to entice resident and transient diners alike. "The goal from Day 1 was to create two stand-alone restaurants," said Mr. McLeod, a Vancouver native who also oversees the Elysian's fine-dining restaurant, Ria. "We do have the challenge of people who expect a chicken Caesar salad," he added.

The restaurant's emphasis on quality ingredients, which includes sourcing food from nearly 100 local and regional purveyors, starts at the top. Before a career in real estate, the Elysian's owner, David Pisor, worked as a waiter for his aunt, [Alice Waters](#), at her restaurant Chez Panisse. His father, Robert Pisor, founded Stone House Bread, bringing artisan baking to the resort areas of northern Michigan. With his first hotel the junior Mr. Pisor insisted on fresh, seasonal food. "We probably get calls every week for Champagne and strawberries in the room, and we have to say: 'Sorry, strawberries aren't in season. We do have some incredible [pears](#) right now,'" he said.

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