

## Farm to Table

### Twelve restaurants featuring market fare

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Browntrout

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### Balsan

11 E. Walton | 312-646-1400

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EUROPEAN | BREAKFAST, LUNCH, DINNER: SEVEN DAYS | SATURDAY & SUNDAY BRUNCH

The journey up from the echoing, marble-clad lobby of the Elysian to its two third-floor restaurants, Ria and the more casual Balsan, is probably meant to emulate the passage of a Greek hero gone to his reward, but on my first trip, I felt more like an overwhelmed mausoleum salesman taking a lunch break from the sales floor. Balsan actually looks more solemn than the comfy-looking lounge leading into its fine-dining neighbor. But the long, stark, monochromatically glitzy main dining room turns out to offer a tightly curated yet laid-back and consistently imaginative dinner menu geared toward sharing. Chef Jason McLeod has spent most of his career in hotel dining, but his chef de cuisine, Danny Grant, spent a good bit of his at North Pond, and a good deal of what's happening at Balsan reflects that restaurant's familiar emphasis on the seasonal and the house-made. The easy informal air is set by the raw bar and mostly house-made charcuterie selection. The latter is hardly a distinguishing feature on paper anymore, but it's among the best I've tried in town. Slabs of squab and black trumpet mushroom terrine, a buttery foie gras torchon sprinkled with sea-salt grit, and luscious duck rillettes were beautifully presented with cheeses served at precisely the right temperature, pickled vegetables, and other well-chosen accents. Another now-familiar feature, a wood-fired oven, turns out pizzas like a burrata margherita and a tarte flambée whose Pleasant Ridge Reserve cheese-bacon-onion funk is softened by creme fraiche with superthin crusts jacketed by a superstratum of ethereal crispiness. It would be easy for a group to pick over an assortment of small plates like a veal heart salad—slices of cold roast beef amid a forest of frisee, pear, and Manchego—and diver scallops strewn across a body of curried apple puree. A couple of these are early contenders for my favorite bites of the year, like the soft-boiled hen egg, meant to be mashed up with sauteed wild mushrooms, potato puree, and a crispy potato tuile, and the seared-off section of meaty testa cake amalgamated with bread crumbs and plated with prunes and garlic chips. These shareable smaller dishes extend to a short list of sides including a satisfying crock of two-bean cassoulet and probably the ultimate french fry in recent memory—fried in beef tallow, with a delicate, crispy exoskeleton barely protecting the thin, fluffy insides. The Elysian's two restaurants were initially supposed to be launched by Charlie Trotter, and while I'm sure he'd have complemented the hotel's opulence with jackbooted precision, I can't imagine he'd have been able to pull off something as fun and unfussy as McLeod has in Balsan. —Mike Sula