

T TABLE

DINING OUT

THE INN CROWD

Two shiny spots in the Elysian Hotel blast onto the Gold Coast—one buzzing, the other stunning

BY JEFF RUBY



Balsan chic (above); Ria's apples, sablé Breton, "bandaged" Cheddar, and herb salad (above, right)

STAR WAS BORN AT THE ELYSIAN HOTEL THIS WINTER, AND NO ONE CAME TO THE NURSERY to visit. Ria, a polished new spot masterminded by a chef you've never heard of and staffed by servers so young they look as if their moms dropped them off at work, could eventually take its place at the table with Chicago's restaurant elites. But first people need to know Ria exists. Then they have to accept the whole thing as a work in progress, which is a leap of faith at these prices.

Jason McLeod, the chef at Ria (REE-uh) as well as the more casual Balsan across the hall, freely admits that Ria has not yet removed its training wheels. "Our goal was to build as we go and add some more dishes," says the Vancouver Island native of his tiny menu. "We did not want to get too adventurous to begin with." Does that mean McLeod doesn't consider a wonderful appetizer of soft-poached hen egg with Spanish chorizo, baby leeks, and cockscomb on a bed of finely chopped caramelized onions to be adventurous? You can understand why I'm eager to see where the place goes.

THE SKINNY

BALSAN

Elysian Hotel,
11 E. Walton St.;
312-646-1400

→ **WHINE** Balsan has to do something about those long, awkward runners on tables. They're an accident waiting to happen in someone's lap.

→ **TAB** (without wine, tax, or tip)
Lunch \$35 to \$40;
dinner \$45 to \$50

→ **HOURS** Breakfast, lunch, dinner daily. Brunch Saturday and Sunday

RIA

Elysian Hotel,
11 E. Walton St.;
312-880-4400

→ **FYI** When the waitress carts over a giant wheel of Comté that had been aged 36 months in a cave, say yes.

→ **TAB** (without wine, tax, or tip)
\$65 to \$75

→ **HOURS** Dinner Tuesday through Saturday

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For now, the experience feels less like a restaurant visit and more like a banquet on a private island with your own staff.

Dan Pilkey, the charming sommelier, could talk wine all night, and he did when we ordered a frappuccino-toned 2006 Añoño malbec on one visit. Our cheerily efficient waitress told us that the roomy, minimalist environs reflected some kind of “nautical theme.” Though the space was plenty appealing, with its wispy curtains and cushy chairs, if there was anything maritime, I must have missed the boat.

Before appetizers, servers plied us with “a gift from the kitchen” (a lovely, crisp choux pastry filled with Gruyère), an amuse (a foie gras macaron with shaved hazelnuts and a dab of huckleberry syrup), and warm mini baguettes made in-house. So I didn’t much mind that my starter of apple slices with buttery sablé Breton shortbread, “bandaged” Cheddar, and herb salad was a bit, uh, wee. On one visit, fish represented three of the five entrées—ah, the nautical theme—including half a fillet of grilled sturgeon neighbored by three crispy-tender hunks of braised pork belly, glazed baby carrots, and a thick carrot purée. Glorious.

Menus these days go nuts with wordy descriptions, but McLeod’s does the exact opposite. When I ordered the innocuous-sounding “squab, sweetbreads, savoy cabbage, lemon,” I did not realize I would get a stunning work of art I’d be talking about for months rather than just a pigeon and a pancreas. Where another restaurant might obsessively explain every element of your plate, Ria leaves much of the guesswork to diners. “Peking duck for two, grapefruit, baby turnips, foie gras” actually represents a nuanced two-course mini feast for each diner. First you both get a traditional sliced breast, insanely rich with crispy skin in a duck port sauce; then a tartlet harboring decadent leg meat alongside a lobe of pistachio-crust foie gras in pear purée.

There comes a point in any surprisingly good meal—often just prior to dessert—when you pray to the restaurant gods that you haven’t experienced a fluke. Ria’s final course, courtesy of its pastry chefs, Andrew Johnson and Alissa Wallers, takes things to another level. A gooey spiced hazelnut cake with dried cherries, hazelnuts, two scoops of praline gelato, and a cherry reduction crisp came together in a thrilling way. One bite of the floating island with brandy crème anglaise and I looked around Ria’s empty room, astonished that we were alone. As my eyes stopped on the wall sculpture of 1,700 polyester-resin fish bones—which resembles a flock of birds more than a school of

fish—I had one thought: Soon diners will be gathering, too.

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WE’VE ALL ACCEPTED THAT HOTEL RESTAURANTS don’t have to be stodgy fossils, so it’s time to ask the next logical question: Can they be fun? All kinds of glowing adjectives could describe NoMI in the Park Hyatt and Avenues in the Peninsula, yet neither room strikes me as the kind of place you would go for a night of raging excitement. But on the Elysian’s third floor, across from the social Siberia that is Ria, there’s a party going on, and it involves raw oysters, cured meats, stiff drinks, and table-hopping. Welcome to Balsan, a sexy room that is as packed as Ria is vacant.

The long marble bar that dominates Balsan’s gold-toned space is threatening to devolve into a Gold Coast pickup hot spot—not that the looky-loos seated at nearby four-tops appear to mind. Nor does Jason McLeod’s team of 40 staffers, who run Ria and Balsan from one giant kitchen, juggling separate menus, china, and servers. “It’s actually a lot of fun,” says McLeod, a veteran of Four Seasons restaurants from Whistler to Emerald Bay. “We divided up the kitchen originally, but we decided to do it together.”

Perhaps they should have kept it divided. Balsan’s maddening unpredictability starts with the schizoid menu, which is equal parts harmless and audacious. Pizza rubs elbows with testa cakes; burgers and fries share ink with veal heart and head-cheese. Food quality is also all over the place. You could luck into a melt-in-your-mouth boudin blanc made of pork and foie gras served on a pillowy bed of leeks, or you might fall victim to a depressing chocolate tart with a flavor so muted you forget it’s chocolate. Temperature problems cast a shadow over otherwise pleasant offerings such as a wood-grilled Margherita pizza with burrata and a creamy celeriac soup with bacon and pickled ramps. Your best bet, as far as I can tell, is to split some charcuterie, followed by a juicy, garlicky whole roasted chicken with oven-roasted Brussels sprouts, lardons, and tangy pearl onions, then a side of silky buttermilk grits. And—try not to snicker—order two Paris-Brests. The magnificent wheel of choux pastry stuffed with praline cream and caramelized hazelnut crisp is simply too good to share.

As at Ria, most of Balsan’s servers are young and eager. On one visit, everyone we came into contact with was dialed in, smart, and all-around terrific. On another, our waiter was so detached that he had one foot in the dining room and the other in some house party in West Town. That’s the trouble with fun: It’s unreliable. ■