

North Pond Deserves More than Special Occasion Status

The imaginative American fare at this underrated Lincoln Park spot is not just for birthdays and anniversaries.

BY JEFF RUBY

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Bison loin carpaccio; Bruce Sherman at North Pond PHOTOS: ANNA KNOTT

We found a parking spot on Cannon Drive and strolled through Lincoln Park en route to North Pond. My wife and I had made this pleasant trek through the woods behind the restaurant on a few occasions, past the stern Oglesby statue and down a flight of wooden steps toward the restaurant, glowing bright on a dark night.

The first time, when we were dating and nervous, trying

North Pond

hard to put our best selves forward. And later, after we got married, when we knew the truth about each other and didn't mind. Now we were doing it as shell-shocked parents, deeply connected and wondering how long we'd be tired. On each evening, we held hands as the sight of the placid pond and glittery skyline opened up before us like a sumptuous Pinot. For a hungry couple attracted to one another and in love with Chicago, every visit to North Pond turned out to be memorable.

People tend to forget about the place. Hidden away and not remotely trendy, North Pond generally turns up on radars every few years for an anniversary or a graduation. Maybe brunch when the in-laws visit from St. Louis. As such, the clientele leans older, the buzz never rising above a low hum.

2610 N. Cannon Dr.

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FYI A James Beard-winning chef. A Michelin star. And still you haven't been to North Pond in years. Shame on you.

Tab \$65 to \$90

Hours Dinner Wed. to Sun.,
brunch Sun.

*Tab does not include alcohol,
tax, or tip.*

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But whether you're in front of the popping fireplace in winter or the open French doors in summer, Bruce Sherman's earthy American spot sells a magical version of Chicago year-round. As we approached the restaurant this time, a bushy-tailed rabbit bounded past my wife's feet before disappearing into the thick brush. It's almost as though someone inside said, "They're coming! Release the bunny!"

The structure, built in 1912 as a warming shelter for ice skaters, has served over the years as a storage shed, a homeless shelter, a natural foods store, and a hot dog stand. By the nineties, a tree had taken root through the boiler. Then, in 1998, restaurateur Richard Mott and architect Nancy Warren reimagined the building as a sturdy Arts and Crafts lodge with wood inlay ceilings and a Fond du Lac stone chimney. It does not qualify as romantic in a flickery candlelight kind of way. But North Pond's romance makes you feel good about the people you're with. The city you're in. And the food you're eating.

Sherman, a Chicago native who has lived and cooked everywhere from London to Paris to Delhi to Philly, has always been a smart chef. He did seasonal cuisine before Chicagoans knew what that meant. But his steadfast approach feels all the more solid now, given how the restaurant landscape has changed around him. As the pendulum has swung from spheres and gels to pork belly and bourbon, North Pond has continued to tread its own path. "My stubborn persistence on moderating the modernization has prevented greater culinary transformation," says Sherman. "But the pace has allowed us to grow healthily."



Foie gras crème brûlée

The growth has been nearly invisible. At first blush the menu reads like a straightforward love letter to seasonal American cooking, but over the years Sherman's cerebral dishes have quietly upended expectations. An immensely satisfying recent tasting menu (\$90) started off with not one, not two, but three sweet

dishes in a row. First came an astounding foie gras crème brûlée strewn with candied peanuts and a wispy toasted “brioche boat” dabbed with cassis gelée and rosemary purée.

Then, an unadvertised carrot-coconut course: a fantastic thick bisque with a spot prawn and a housemade baby won ton. After digging into a red kuri fritter with a butternut-Mutsu terrine, Senshu apple orbs, and thin ribbons of delicata squash, my wife and I wondered if the whole meal—and time itself—was going backward. That’s North Pond’s secret: It looks like your rich cousin’s cabin, but your eccentric and possibly brilliant uncle has commandeered the kitchen. “The majority of our clientele doesn’t dine here for the trends,” says Sherman. “But surely if we hadn’t moved forward we’d have lost folks along the way.”

Even when the tasting menu plays it straight, it pulses with creativity. The dramatic smoked beef tenderloin gets echoed by barbecued cranberry beans and tempered by melon, then gilded with French green beans and a lone savory onion ring. The intriguing wine pairings especially pay off here, with a sunbaked 2011 Feudi di San Gregorio Aglianico Rubrato from Campania. And I kept claiming pastry chef Greg Mosko’s cranberry sorbet with a maple-toned stout cake, sheep’s milk pumpkin cheesecake mousse, and bursting glazed cranberries wasn’t “my kind of thing.” Then I couldn’t stop eating it.

So many prix fixe meals today punish diners with endurance tests that last three hours and run through dozens of intricate courses, and Lord help you if you get the drink pairings, too. “The consumer of such a meal may feel as much like a victim as a guest,” *New York Times* dining critic Pete Wells wrote in 2012. “The courses blur, the palate flags and the check stings.” In part, North Pond’s tasting menu rises above for what it doesn’t do. My meal, a relaxed five courses with multiple bonuses, lasted two hours and left me in an exhilarated state of comfort rather than a sluggish daze. That’s no accident, says Sherman, who refuses to hold customers captive to his whims and timing. In other words, the meal belongs to the diner, not the chef.

Unfortunately, around 80 percent of North Pond’s diners go the à la carte route, which

does not yield the same fireworks. Several dishes fall in that culinary no man's land between fusty and creative, an untenable gap bound to satisfy few customers. One \$39 boondoggle mixes so many elements—pan-roasted pheasant breast, sticky-sweet cranberries, a gingerbread crumble, turnips, braised collard greens—that your tongue gets whiplash. Others devolve into a soft blur of grab-bag ingredients, such as the grilled wild bass with cooked squash, chorizo-spiced garbanzos, dates, Marcona almonds, clementine wedges, and a whole lot of fennel.

Some offerings on the à la carte menu fly in the three-star air, but they're harder to find. For one dish, Sherman's crew members salt-cure a duck breast and cook it skin side down until it's crispy. Simultaneously, they slow-braise a duck thigh before mixing it with confit gizzards, raisins, and wine-poached pears, among other joys. Everything ends up inside pillowy flash-fried empanadas with brown sugar pear-sage butter. It's daring, labor intensive, and spectacular.

The kitchen and ever-game waitstaff reluctantly accept the restaurant's reputation as a special-occasion destination—and perpetuate it with cheesy touches like printing the anniversary couple's name on a plate in chocolate. Nothing wrong with that. (Though an \$18 Sazerac may be pushing a little too hard.) Sherman shrugs that the celebratory side helps pay the bills, and I'm all for anything that keeps a place like North Pond running. But I wish more Chicagoans knew and embraced the restaurant's other personality, the one where unleashed imagination tells you that anything could happen. Young couples just might fall in love.

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