

Gourmet**Gossip** | By Sarah Levy

PROFITEROLES from Le Bouchon are the perfect end to a delightful dinner of French cuisine.



LE BOUCHON

Although **Le Bouchon** is only steps away from my home, I would walk miles to enjoy the food at this authentic French Bistro. Their Salade Lyonnaise is one of my favorite salads in the world—and that’s not an exaggeration. Prepared with freshly baked croutons, thick pieces of bacon and a juicy poached egg that meshes into the dressing, it’s a uniquely rich and delectable combination. Or, warm up with the duck for two—a succulent and tender duck, perfect for a chilly winter evening. But don’t get too cozy. After you’ve finished, cool off again with Profiteroles, the perfect traditional French dessert. Think: pâte à choux pastry puffs stuffed with vanilla ice cream, then drenched with a warm chocolate sauce. Trust me, the dessert is so good you won’t be thinking about the weather. *1958 North Damen Avenue, 773.862.6600, www.lebouchonofchicago.com*

TIMO WILL TELL

Chef John Bubala flawlessly accomplished transforming his once French-inspired Thyme restaurant into an elegant Italian restaurant called **Timo**. He also firmly succeeded in his attempt to produce “serious food in a casual atmosphere.” The staff’s warmth, along with Chef Bubala’s charm, allows customers to sit back and relax at Timo while enjoying nothing short of phenomenal food. The Parmesan Shrimp spiked with vanilla beannage red syrup and garlic appetizer exemplifies Timo’s tendency to add a hint of sweetness to traditional, savory dishes. I also advise trying the Swan Creek Farm Spit-Roasted Chicken, with its delicate crisp skin and tender center, you’ll be supremely satisfied. *464 North Halsted Street, 312.226.4300*



CHEF JOHN BUBALA succeeds in producing serious food in a casual atmosphere at his Italian-influenced Timo.



SCHWA-BANG

Imagine a dining experience where the quality of food is on par with Charlie Trotter’s but the atmosphere is as laid-back as your favorite neighborhood spot. That’s what an evening spent dining at **Schwa** feels like. Their BYOB policy, the chefs’ faux-hawk hairdos, the hip-hop and reggae music playing in the background and the intern’s name on the menu all contribute to making this place succeed in feeling completely “stripped of pretension.” The nine-course meal blew me away, as did the service—each course was served directly to the table by one of the three chefs. I’ll admit, I didn’t often know exactly what I was eating, but I loved every minute/bite of it! I recommend starting with the Tomato Salad that features juicy tomatoes, brioche croutons, a tangy tomato sorbet and several creamy sauces that blend together perfectly. Though my all-time favorite dish at Schwa is the Quail Egg Ravioli—ricotta, brown butter and parmigiano reggiano cheese surrounding a perfectly cooked ravioli, which, when popped into your mouth, oozes a creamy quail egg center. Heavenly. *1466 North Ashland Avenue, 773.252.1466, www.schwarestaurant.com*

FRANCESCA’S FORNO

I like to think of **Francesca’s Forno** as Mia Francesca’s fiery niece. While she may not be as well-refined as her elder, she is fun and thoroughly enjoyable. While I racked my brain trying to think of my favorite entrée, only to come up blank, I could effortlessly rattle off several of my favorite appetizers. First, kudos to the wood-burning oven that churns out delicious and crispy pizza. My favorite is the

Napoletana—arugula, cherry tomatoes, garlic, provolone and parmesan cheese. The Salumi e Formaggi selection is also an awesome way to start. I recommend going for the Choose Three for \$20 option and ordering the flavorful Prosciutto di Parma, slightly sweet Ricotta e Miele—hand-dipped ricotta, honey, sea salt and black pepper—and the Pecorino Tartufato—aged sheep’s milk cheese with truffles. The Asparagus Gratinati—crispy parmesan-crusting asparagus—is the perfect side dish. But make sure to leave room for the assorted Gelato sandwiches, complete with chocolate, caramel or raspberry sauces! To note, I must mention that Francesca’s Forno is an extremely loud room. While yummy, it’s perhaps not the best spot for a romantic dinner for two. *1576 North Milwaukee Avenue, 773.770.0184, www.francescarestaurants.com/restaurants/forno*

NEIGHBORHOOD SPOT

A Roscoe Village classic, **Piazza Bella Trattoria** serves up traditional Italian food in a comfortable and quaint atmosphere. The Zuppe Pasta E Fagioli is the ideal winter soup. It has a thicker consistency than most and is served with beans, pasta and a hint of rosemary. As for the main course, Piazza Bella consistently serves generous portions of pasta and meat entrées alike, which are also consistently delicious. The Fusilli alla Mimi, however, is my “go-to” dish. The pasta is cooked perfectly al dente and then topped with delicious eggplant, mozzarella, tomato and dry ricotta cheese. *2116 West Roscoe Street, 773.477.7330, www.piazzabella.com* ■

Sarah Levy is the president and founder of Sarah’s Pastries & Candies, 11 East Oak Street, 312.664.6223.