

February 15, 2018

S.K.Y.

1239 W. 18th St., 312-846-1077
b/t Allport St & Throop St
Pilsen

Opened 11-17-17

Cuisine: Asian- and European-inspired American
Executive chef/owner: Stephen Gillanders @ 310-321-8676
Maître d': Matt Trinidad @ 773-639-8684 & matt@skyrestaurantchicago.com
PR: Lorraine Petrie @ lorraine@skyrestaurantchicago.com @ 301-751-4899

80 seats

Full bar to come

THE PLACE

Three months in, S.K.Y. is still BYO. I love the space. It's a big single-story white brick rectangle of a building on the corner directly across from Thalia Hall. Prime location in Pilsen.

Kitchen windows facing 18th Street provide a great show from outside. Probably a better view from outside than inside. A fun way to window-shop your dinner. Open kitchens are all about a certain kind of voyeurism and showmanship and they are as common as dishtowel napkins but, still, there's something gutsy about being visible to street passers-by.

Deep, fairly wide space. Host stand right up front melds into the lounge and bar space. You pass a few freestanding tables on the way to dining room. Kind of an odd hallway. Don't know if I would want to be seated there. Seems as though there would be a constant flow of traffic past your table.

That said the dining room, in all its concrete and ductwork glory, opens up as a fairly spacious room with a friendly casual feel and neighborhood vibe. There are comfortable upholstered banquettes on each side and more four tops down the middle. Lively but not overwhelmingly noisy. All natural colors (plus aubergine-colored back tufting for the banquettes) and wood tables and real cloth napkins. No dishtowels here.

Chef's wife, Seon Kyung Yuk, designed the room. The building previously housed three separate businesses and the piano studio let an old organ behind, which makes for a cool conversation piece in the DR. Compact open kitchen is at far end and exudes activity. Those folks are here to work – not perform. Passionate to a person.

Will the whole place be noisier when the liquor license kicks in?

Soundtrack inspired by female rock musicians our waitress, Stefanie tells us.

SERVICE

And we love Stefanie. Efficient. Friendly, helpful, no pretense. Gives good advice.

She would have served the creamed corn on the side of the chicken dish if we wanted it that way but she gently endorsed the idea of how integral the corn is to the whole. And she is right! See chicken below.

There is **one special**: Texas wagyu/7 oz, \$34. From Texas, says Stefanie. I express surprise at the low price, and she explains with friendly enthusiasm that S.K.Y. is the only restaurant in the country to serve this particular wagyu.

No pressure to place the order and no pressure to place the order all at once.

Lots of people work this room but they never bump into one another. Plates are cleared and replaced as appropriate. Plain, white circular with a rim, from Crate and Barrel.

MENU

This menu begs my eternal question: Why are some menus boring and some menu irresistible? Love, love, love the S.K.Y. menu. I had trouble ordering b/c I wanted everything. And the menu is coherent. Recognizable dishes, 60% or so American, with Asian and Euro touches. Like cornbread madeleines (American South and French!). And some solidly Asian preps: **hamachi sashimi** (Gillanders brought this over **from his Intro menu**), Thai steak salad, and foie gras bibimbap—which **can be had vegetarian** with an egg rather than foie. And none of these creations seem forced or pretentious. Great mixed marriages loved by all sides.

A concise menu with no cutesy categories: Snacks and Shares (5), Appetizers (5), Mains (7), Vegetables (3).

Simple language. No laundry list of ingredients or suppliers. No farms. No dairies. No cheesemongers. No ranches. No dayboat catches.

Everything sounds delicious. Everything! Simplicity scores.

No self-aggrandizing either. No chefs names.

VALUE: Prices are shockingly reasonable for what you get: And I mean the expertise. Portion sizes are fine but, the food, aesthetically and viscerally, is fantastic.

THE MEAL

Started with an **amuse** from the chef: Thickly smooth **edamame** mixed with olive oil, cilantro, garlic, and lime on rice crackers. One for each diner. Mmmm. Delightful way to start. Simple, soothing, and refreshing all at once. Fun and flavorful start.

We are immediately excited about dinner.

SNACKS & SHARES

Black truffle croquettes \$9 (4 to the order)
Aged white cheddar, jalapeño

Four small, perfectly round, perfectly fried croquettes nested in a frisée salad dressed with black truffle vinaigrette. Warm gooey cheese center. Crisp breading. Panko crumbs, I suspect. Good as the croquettes were, we all went nuts for the frisée. That's what insanely fresh food, prepared to order, will do to you.

APPETIZERS

Maine lobster dumplings \$16 (4 to the order)
jade butter, soft herbs

Lush and luscious. Tender crescent-shaped dumplings bathed in a pool of jade butter. Gently wilted fresh herbs strewn on top. What is jade butter, anyway? (I texted Matt Trinidad with my question.) Inside the dumplings: chunks of Maine lobster. This dish is so special, it's a party. With four to the order, this could have been my entire dinner.

MAINS

Organic fried chicken \$19
fermented hot sauce, creamed corn

A boneless thigh, delicately fried (read: still juicy) rests on the side of the plate. Just touching one part of the thigh, there is a circle, a wreath, of creamed corn ringing the plate. Colorful on its own, the whole thing gets better when an orange-colored fermented hot sauce is poured into the middle of the corn, forming a pool. There is more than corn here, maybe onion bits to ensure some texture. And oh that sauce, heats up your mouth nicely. Mix it into the corn. Use it as a

dip for each bite of chicken. Just don't let it go to waste. And we didn't. Our plated looked licked clean.

Berkshire pork chop \$28

Habanero honey sauce, wild rice risotto

Five thick slabs of pork cut off the bone, and served with the bone which is worth a gnaw in its own right, propped over wild rice risotto mixed with collard greens. I don't even like collard greens, but this earthy nutty flavored combo is brilliant. The habanero honey sauce seems sweet by comparison to the hot sauce on the chicken. Perhaps we should eaten this first.

VEGETABLES

Blistered green beans

Cantonese vinaigrette

Al dente, wrinkled, and blistered as promised. Topped with crushed peanuts and soaking up fermented black bean paste.

Lively. I keep coming back to the word lively here. Because everything is.

DESERTS

Banana budino \$9

Vanilla, granola, bourbon

Hey, it's banana pudding that is shockingly addictive. There is a lot going on here. Dried fruits, nuts, bourbon, and more come together in southern bourbon comfort.

THOUGHTS

Original when I thought originality had died. Skillful, well thought Every dish is a surprise and nothing is over-produced.

Loved S.K.Y. Most exciting new spot in ages. There's real creativity and talent there. Gillanders has it totally under control. Nothing runs wild.

JADE BUTTER RECIPE:

Hi Penny, here's are the ingredients and the steps chef does to make the jade butter

Jalapenos, seeds & ribs removed, rough chopped

Whole Jalapenos, seeds & ribs intact, rough chopped

Orange Zest, microplaned very gently from thick skinned oranges (absolutely no pith)

Salt

Pink Grapefruit Zest, microplaned very gently from thick skinned grapefruits (absolutely no pith)

In a blender, combine everything except for the Pink Grapefruit Zest process to medium smooth, but still a coarse mash. Transfer to a baine marie and wrap tightly with two layers with plastic wrap; let sit at room temp for 24 hours. After 24 hours, transfer the mash into a chinois and drain for exactly 30 minutes. Remove the drained paste and finish with the Pink Grapefruit Zest.