

Sea NOTES

Lettuce Entertain You ups the ante with its new Mediterranean concept, *Aba*, delivering enticing entrees and an eclectic list of unique wines from far-flung places.

By Ariel Cheung // Photography by Tim McCoy



From left: Lush greenery and cozy nooks envelop the main dining room at *Aba*, the latest arrival to the thriving West Loop restaurant scene; the restaurant's bright beet tzatziki (\$9) delivers a cool, tangy interpretation of the dish with complementing notes of horseradish, dill and finger limes.



As a lover (and heavy-handed user) of garlic, I found myself delighted in *Aba*, the immensely popular West Loop follow-up to River North's *Ema*. The pungent flavor wove its way through our meal, from the cool, tangy beet tzatziki (\$9) to the plump curls of kanpachi (\$13) begging to be dragged through their pool of green sauce, bursting with bold peppery notes and rich garlicky bite. We sopped up every drop.

Executive chef C.J. Jacobson has allowed himself more freedom here, where meaty butcher cuts and crudo join spreads, kebabs and seafood small plates at the California-influenced homage to Mediterranean cuisine. While *Ema* (which means "mother" in Hebrew) focuses on vegetables, its "father" counterpart expands

into proteins in a lovely way. For his take on steak shawarma (\$20), Jacobson drew inspiration from the Mexican derivative, *al pastor*. He layers bright flavors to buoy the tender slices of steak, served medium-rare and cut thicker than the traditional street food-style shavings of shawarma. "We keep the deep, long-marinated spices of shawarma and add a lot of orange and citrus," he explains. "These dishes are something you understand, but they're a little different. It's more authentic to who we are."

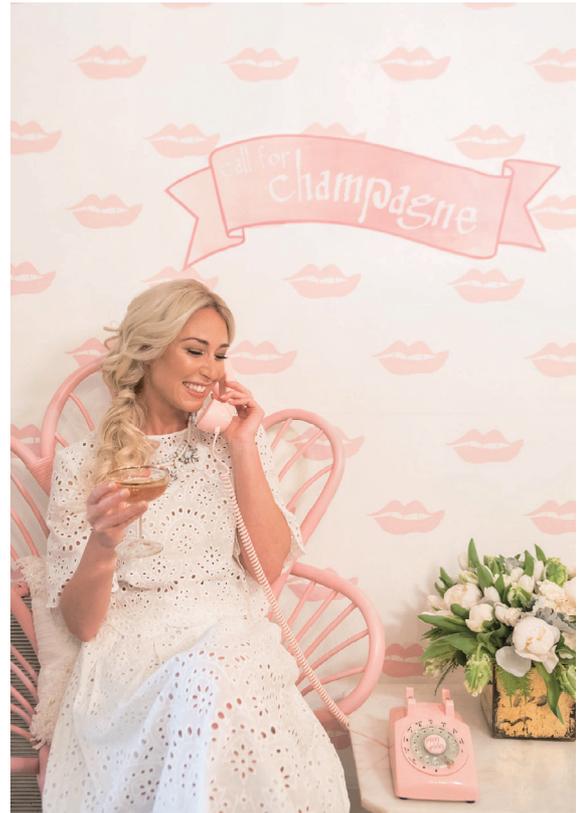
Across the board, the flavors at *Aba* are fun and vary widely. Cocktails run from the stiff Green St. Manhattan (\$14), a Buffalo Trace bourbon-based concoction tinged with citrus-heavy Cinzano sweet vermouth and blackstrap molasses, to the nicely balanced mango G&T (\$13). For something finer, *Aba* has classic cocktails made with high-end spirits. Among CONTINUED...

ABA

302 N. Green St., 3rd Floor
773.645.1400
abarestaurantchicago.com

Mon.-Thu., 4PM-midnight
Fri.-Sat., 4PM-1AM
Sun., 4-10PM

Small plates, \$7-\$15; larger plates, \$13-\$40; desserts, \$4-\$10; cocktails, \$12-\$28



PHOTOS: GERBER + SCARPELLI

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—C.J. JACOBSON, EXECUTIVE CHEF »



...CONTINUED them, the 5th Generation Margarita (\$28) combines Fortaleza Still Strength tequila with Grand Marnier Cuvée Centenaire.

Just as enthralling is a trip through the wide-spanning wine list, which features an eclectic assortment of bottles from Lebanon, Israel, Morocco and Greece. “The goal was to get people to try wine from places they didn’t even know made wine,” says Ryan Arnold, divisional wine director for Lettuce Entertain You. Among the highlights is a decades-spanning suite of reds by acclaimed Lebanese winemaker Serge Hochar’s Chateau Musar, from a 1996 bottle (\$174) to an offering from 2009 (\$132), allowing diners to suss out subtle differences in vintages as the wines soften with age. Meanwhile, a 2014 Tzora Judean Hills chardonnay (\$90) from Israel proved to be “the most compelling chardonnay I’ve ever had from that part of the world,” he notes. “And we’re the only ones to have it in Chicago.”

Wine or cocktail, sip away while starting your meal with the short rib-topped hummus (\$16), a savory medley of rich, tender meat, grilled onions and mouthwatering jus piled onto herb-flecked pita. Raw plates are smartly treated, ranging from the aforementioned kanpachi to a charred lamb tartare (\$14), which is tossed with a healthy crop of mint, ginger, crispy rice and Fresno chilis and served with lettuce cups for a Thai-leaning take on a lettuce wrap.

While the small plates can be quite irresistible, be sure to save room for the larger plates of Mishima Reserve wagyu topped with black garlic salt (\$40) and

chargrilled lamb chops (\$28). For a taste of the sea, the halibut (\$23) is nicely treated with a crisp coating and a hint of lemon. Mushrooms served on the side are plump and umami-rich, although another crunchy vegetable would have rounded things out perfectly. Thankfully, our side dish of addictively good, perfectly crisp potatoes (\$7) aptly filled in. Chocolate lovers will find satisfaction in the double chocolate tart (\$9), a dense ditty elevated by whipped cream, mint and a thin sesame wafer, but more intriguing is the kulfi (\$8), a cylindrical block of Indian-style ice cream sprinkled with a crumble of toasted marcona almonds and served atop a generous pool of coriander caramel.

If the menu inspires visions of summer on the Mediterranean Sea, the patio grounds that fantasy with a view that is pure Chicago. Sturdy brick buildings recall the West Loop’s history of manufacturing and broad shoulders, and downtown looms in the distance. But with summer slipping away, a welcoming Eden remains indoors, anchored by cool gray marble bars and cozy alcoves for casual lounging. Verdant ferns sprout from each nook, encircling tables lit by the skylight—a serene escape to the coast, right in the heart of the city. ■

From left: Chargrilled lamb chops (\$28) are laid on a bed of freekeh and paired with burnt oregano for chef C.J. Jacobson’s California-influenced take on the Mediterranean dish; the mango G&T (\$13) gets a jolt of spice to complement the sweet mango and honey.