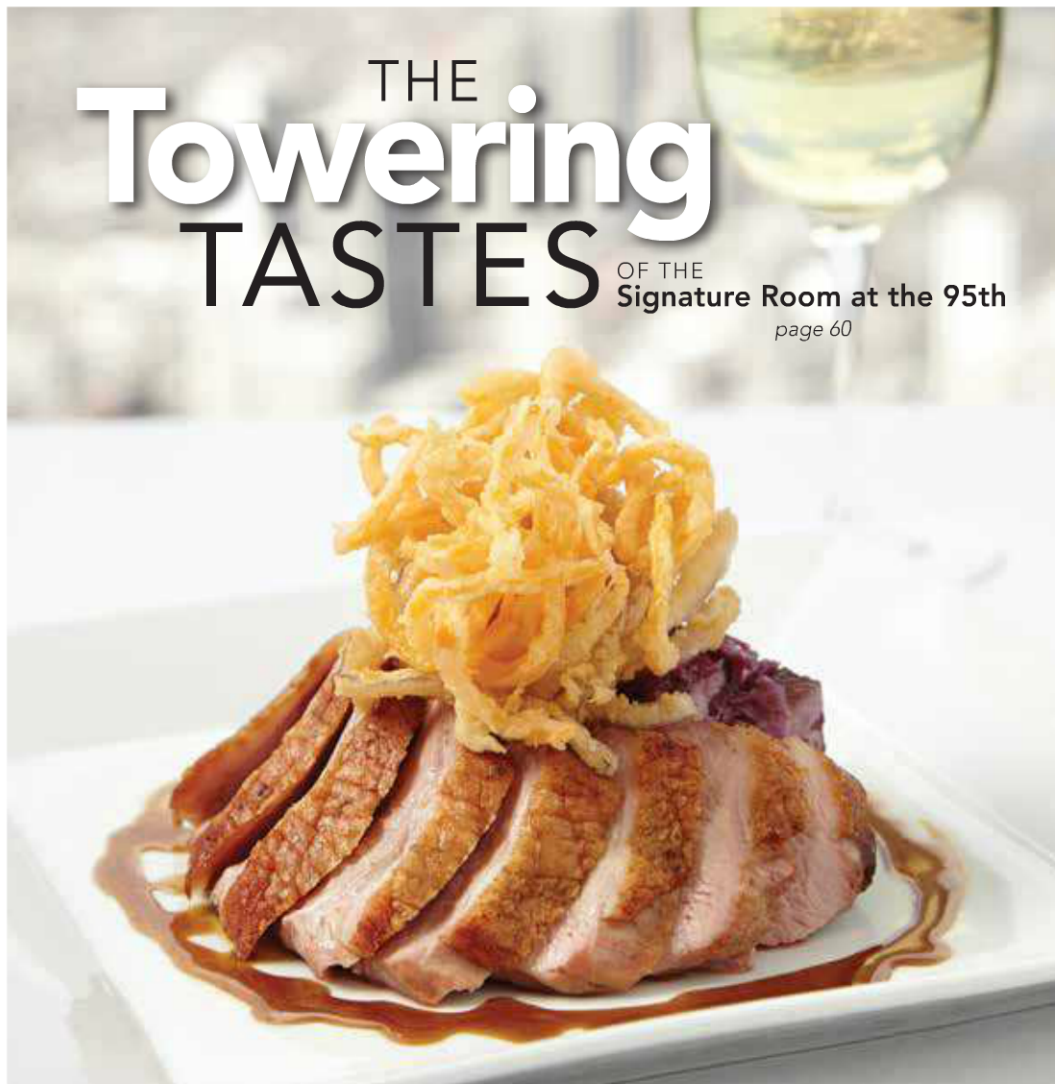


CHICAGO

Spring/Summer 2013

# DINING OUT

the great restaurants of **chicago**



## THE **Towering** TASTES

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### TASTES AND TRENDS TO FEED YOUR INNER FOODIE

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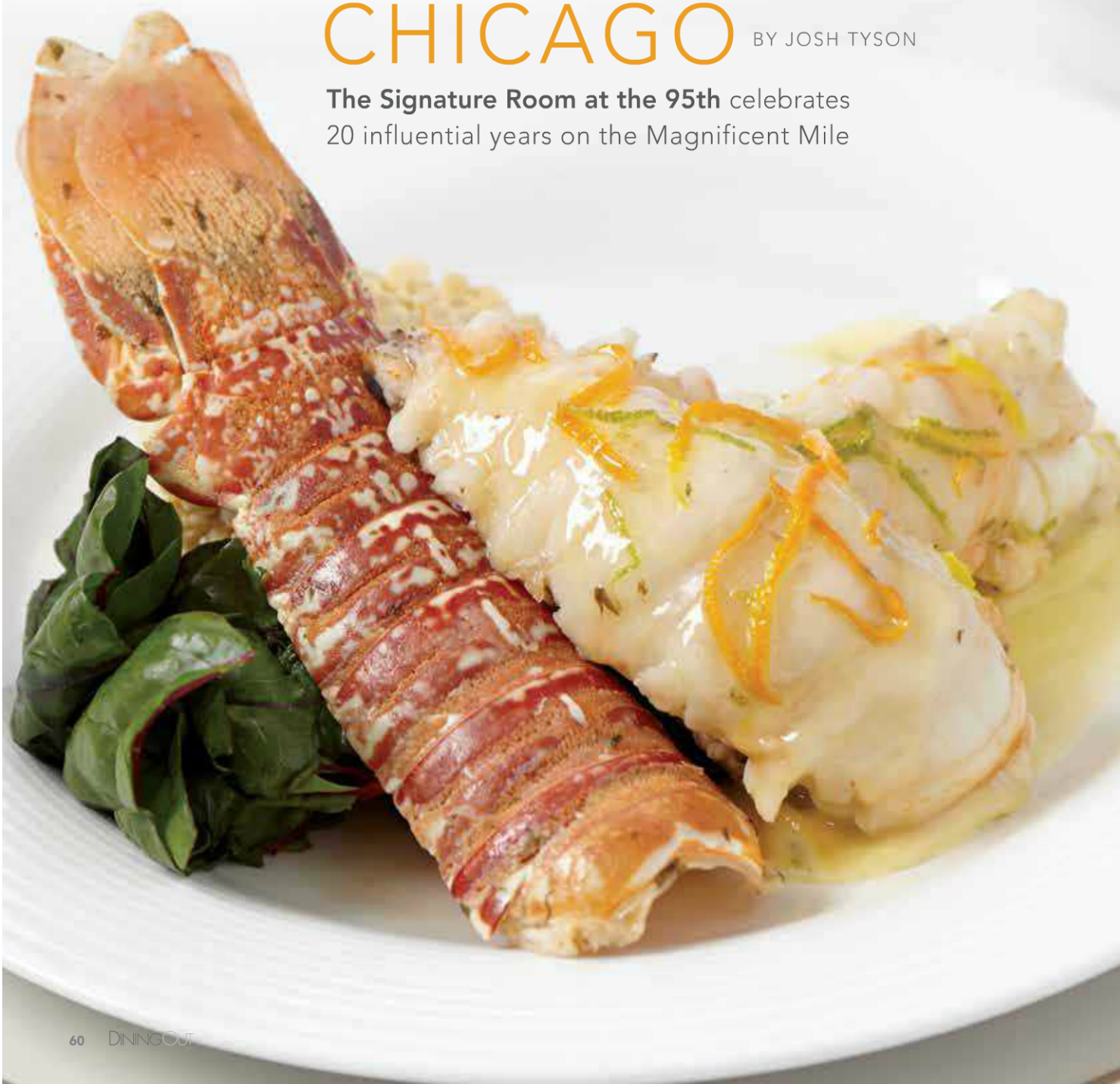


How to Truly

# TASTE

CHICAGO BY JOSH TYSON

The Signature Room at the 95th celebrates  
20 influential years on the Magnificent Mile



*About a decade ago, my friend Nicole came to visit Chicago for the first time. I'd lived in the city for a few years, and knew to wait for her to ask about going up in the (then) Sears Tower before coolly suggesting that it was a tourist trap with long lines for an overpriced elevator ride.*

Instead I took her to The Signature Lounge at the 96th in the John Hancock building. The elevator ride was free and our price of admission was a martini and a glass of red wine. She moved to Chicago a few months later and our kids can tell you: the rest is history.

I won't give the iconic lounge full credit for wooing her, but it's impossible to deny the influence of shared drinks surrounded by floor-to-ceiling windows near the very top of such a remarkable skyline.

Our recent first visit to The Signature Room at the 95th, the fine dining legend one floor below,

an indulgent triptych of flavors and textures—crispy thigh meat, a generous round of seared foie gras, and duck liver mousse were rapidly enjoyed atop crunchy toast points.

Executive Chef Rosalia Barron has worked behind burners for Rick Bayless and other luminaries, and brings a deft personalized touch to a menu that overflows with riches. A poet of pork who was born in Mexico City, the chef captains a formidable crew of 35 in a kitchen with a serious vantage point on Chicago.

"Bringing the eyes of my guests from the spectacular view to a phenomenally presented dish is a great incentive," she laughs.

Our eyes quickly bounced from a city skyline that was starting to glow electric, to a tall bone-in filet and a pair of lobster tails with a ruby glow all their own. It was something.

Something, that is, that cried out for another sip of a red blend from Washington State's Walla Walla Valley. Depending on when you're reading this,



marked a celebratory return to our roots. We arrived a little before dusk and walked through a sprawling dining room awash in sunlight—the very same tinkling on the windows of hundreds of tall buildings seen from above.

A sense of calm percolated with possibility. Our server, Rudy, and his team introduced themselves and guided us to the Seafood Tower—an iced-up three-tiered platter with crab legs, lobster tail, jumbo shrimp, oysters, and sauces like spicy rémoulade and horseradish cocktail, its stature matching the much bigger tower housing our dinner table.

Next came Seared Scallops with a crust that broke like caramel lattice. The flavor was immense; luscious bites included tender gnocchi, demure wild mushrooms, and crisp peas that tickled the palate. At the same time, the Duck Trio presented

the 2009 K Vintners "El Jefe"—Tempranillo and Cabernet Sauvignon—is Operations Director and Sommelier Angela Roman Aspito's current favorite. She calls it, "The perfect springtime wine. It's elegant and easy to drink and I am recommending it with almost everything on the current dinner menu—particularly the Rack of Lamb."

Barron prints a new menu monthly, and Aspito's all-American wine list is a synergistic match for its movements.

"It gives me the opportunity to serve the freshest seasonal ingredients and to work with local farms," Barron says. "Many of them are willing to custom-grow new produce for us."

"And any time we change the menu I want to add new wines," Roman Aspito adds. "So I've been

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seeking out interesting varietals—Sangiovese from Washington, for example, and Grüner Veltliner from New York—to match her creative dishes.”

It was likely a combination of the perfect springtime wine and the perfect spring meal we were enjoying so near the clouds, but I had the strange sensation of watching the scene from a distance. A flash popped as Rudy took another magazine-quality picture, likely his 500th couples snapshot of the night. His familiarity with the rhythm of the room was a common trait in every employee we encountered, which makes sense when you consider that 19 of them have been with The Signature Room since it opened in 1993 and 43 total have been with the restaurant for 15 years or more.

As we tucked forks into the Salted Caramel Tart and a White and Dark Chocolate Mousse Cake with marmalade, we smiled. We weren't celebrating an official anniversary, but it felt like a milestone of sorts, both of us back at the Hancock together. We also weren't the only ones holding hands. The couple at the next table was celebrating a fifth date, while the restaurant itself is in the midst of commemorating its 20th anniversary.

The reverie is set to last through July, with dinner specials, Thursday lunch buffet prices rolled back to 1993 for a month, contests to give away two corporate events and a wedding or anniversary party, and more. But here, every month of the year has something special attached to it. As part of The Signature Room Charity of the Month Program, a different cause is selected

each month and, along with 10-percent of the profits from the monthly menu going to the organization, they are given a \$3,000 credit to hold a fundraiser in the restaurant's private dining space.

“This is the place to celebrate life with family and friends—the place to celebrate with the people we love in the city we love,” Owners Rick Roman and Nick Pyknis say of the inimitable *Michelin Guide*-recommended room. “The restaurant has always captured the hope and promise of what Chicago is, was, and will become.”

Heading upstairs to the lounge for a round of martinis nearly 10 years after our first visit, Nicole and I happily remembered the power of that promise and toasted to its perpetuity.