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By: Phil Vettel

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GIBSONS ITALIA * MICHAEL JORDAN'S RESTAURANT * STEAK 48 ****

Steakhouses for the holidays

3 new spots join crowded category

By PHIL VETTEL
Chicago Tribune

There are more difficult challenges in life than selling high-end steaks to Chicagoans and Chicago visitors. Just in time for the start of holiday season, I focus on three new entries (4 months old or less) in Chicago's continuing steakhouse derby.

All three restaurants are sequels of a sort. Gibsons Italia is part of the hugely successful

Gibsons Restaurant Group; Michael Jordan's Restaurant is a west-suburban sibling to the Michael Jordan's Steak House on Michigan Avenue. And Steak 48 is owned by members of the Mastro family, which created (but no longer owns) the Mastro's Steakhouse chain.

Gibsons Italia

Adjacent to the 52-story River Point complex is a four-story building that's about to become one of the most popular dining destinations in town.

Gibsons is already one of the most successful steakhouse con-

cepts in the country. Gibsons Italia, which opened in late October, will only add to the luster. Elevator pitch: Gibsons Italia offers Gibsons steaks augmented with some serious and well-executed Italian dishes, served up in a stunning, contemporary space with glorious views of the Chicago River and cityscape.

Did I mention the retractable-roof top level and the outdoor dining areas on the lower levels?

In support of the "Italia" suffix, the restaurant offers a trio of crudo, available individually or in combination. Striped bass tou-

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ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

An 18-ounce Kansas City strip steak is topped with smoked butter at Michael Jordan's Restaurant in Oak Brook. The west-suburban spot is a sibling to the Michael Jordan's Steak House on Michigan Avenue.

3 new steakhouses join the crowd

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ched with lava salt, king salmon belly with tiny bursts of finger lime, tuna with oyster crema — solid creations all. Mango and sweet peppers help turn the crabmeat-avocado parfait into a dressier version of a similar dish at other Gibsons locations.

Waiters gush about the imported pasta extruder that makes the four pasta dishes (all in starter portions). I was more than skeptical of the raves, particularly after a good-but-not-wonderful spaghetti al pomodoro, but then I tried the thick and chewy caserecce noodles with full-flavored asparagus, and ricotta and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheeses, and it was wonderful.

Italian entrees include a superb veal milanese, made with bone-in, pounded veal chop, and a pork loin fiorentina, fragrant with garlic and rosemary.

The steak selection has been enhanced with some grass-fed Australian beef (aged 75 days, we're told) and A5 kobe beef from Japan's Hyogo prefecture (\$35 per ounce, minimum four).

The double-baked potato, stuffed with cheese and covered in black-truffle shavings, is an easily shared side dish, albeit a \$15 indulgence. Sautéed spinach was the side dish I ordered but did not get; embarrassed by the gaffe, the restaurant sent out two glasses of wine by apology.

The AWOL spinach aside, service is smoothly professional. Waiters tour the dining room in ivory jackets and black pants; apron-wearing assistants match the color scheme.

Michael Jordan's Restaurant

If you're a fan of Michael Jordan's Steak House on



Gibsons Italia is next door to the 52-story River Point complex. The new restaurant has stunning views of the Chicago River and cityscape.

TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE



TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Mango and sweet peppers dress up the crabmeat-avocado parfait at Gibsons Italia, which opened late last month.

Gibsons Italia

233 N. Canal St.
312-414-1100
www.gibsonsitalia.com

Tribune rating: ★★★

Open: Lunch and dinner
Monday to Saturday

Prices: Entrees \$25-\$48;
steaks \$31-\$140

Noise: Conversation challenged

Other: Valet parking

Michael Jordan's Restaurant

1225 W. 22nd St., Oak Brook

made its debut in mid-July, includes all the downtown goodies you've grown to love.

Even better news: You'll probably spend a little less on them.

Executive chef Craig Couper, who oversees both operations, has made sure that the most popular items downtown are part of the suburban menu. The ultra-indulgent garlic ciabatta, drowning in blue-cheese fondue, is here, as is the maple-glazed bacon appetizer. The crabcake is a bit smaller and less pricey than the "colossal" crabcake downtown (and just \$19, rather than \$23), but it's a fine crabcake, supported



ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Wet-aged prime steaks are without flaw and served on 500-degree plates to keep them hot at Steak 48.

nically by a Meyer-lemon coulis.

There are fewer steaks on the west-suburban menu, but the prime Delmonico steak (the one with MJ's personal seal of approval) with ginger-balsamic jus is available, as is

the fine Kansas City strip topped with smoked butter. Moreover, out west, each steak is about \$10 cheaper. True, the steaks are also a couple of ounces smaller, but I was actually grateful for less.

Appetizers do what they need to do; the raw oysters are properly handled, and the Caesar salad is respectable. There's a baseball-size wagyu-style meatball, served in enough rich tomato sauce to make the inclusion of toasted bread a sensible touch (in fact, I'd have been happy with the sauce and toast alone). The shrimp hush puppies, served with a nice remoulade, were a highlight.

I didn't invest much time on desserts, but the Nutella creme brulee, topped with chopped hazelnuts and served alongside a bruleed banana half and a couple of shortbread cookies, was quite good.

The dining room is attractive, broken up visually so it doesn't feel as if there are 150 other people in the room. The bar is large and TV-filled, the hardwood floors apparently were made at least partially from actual basketball flooring and action photos of His Airness abound. An attached coffee bar offers grab-and-go pastry, sandwich and salad options at breakfast and lunch, and when warm weather returns, the large outdoor patio will be a major draw.

A few service issues got in the way of my visit. One waiter poured wine a bit clumsily, dribbled some vino on my table and did nothing about it. We ordered the tuna poke, which came with pickled mango, watermelon radish and fried onions, but it also came with a fistful of sliced jalapenos (not mentioned



ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Tuna poke at Michael Jordan's Restaurant in Oak Brook. The new restaurant has plenty of competition in the area.



ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

A 50-50 mix of salmon and tuna poke is a good compromise if you're undecided which way to go at Steak 48.

on the menu), making the poke too hot to handle. We alerted the waiter, who replaced the dish, but when the check arrived, we were still charged for the poke.

Cornerstone Restaurant Group is smart enough to stick with a winning formula. But Oak Brook, which already has Gibsons, Mike Ditka's, Perry's Steakhouse & Grill and Wildfire in the Oakbrook Center vicinity, has plenty of prime-beef competition. Particularly with service, Michael Jordan's needs to up its game.

Steak 48

Arizona is the 48th state in the U.S., a factoid that should be worth a bar bet anywhere but Steak 48, because that's where the Arizona-based chain (there's a location in Houston, as well) gets its name.

The family that created the Mastro's chain — brothers Jeffrey and Mike Mastro, along with dad Dennis — posit Steak 48 as a more contemporary take on the classic steakhouse model. In practice, this means chef-driven appetizers, more energetic design (the dining room at Mastro's is as dark and comfortable as a womb; the space is lighter here, particularly on the

second floor) and more creative salads and desserts.

All this Steak 48 accomplishes, while sacrificing none of the steakhouse niceties. A skillet of just-baked, pull-apart bread arrives unbidden at the table, service is solicitous without being overbearing, and lavender-scented hot towels bridge the gap between appetizer and main course. The wine list is massive, and there are about 50 by-the-glass pours.

Wet-aged prime steaks — offered in small (8- to 12-ounce) and regular (12- to 22-ounce) cuts — are without flaw, served on 500-degree plates that ensure your beef won't lose temperature anytime soon. (I'm actually not a fan of plates hot enough to warm my eyebrows, but I acknowledge some customers appreciate that sort of thing.) Plenty of topping options range from the simple (blue cheese, \$5) to the extravagant (black-truffle lobster, \$38).

Fun starters include crabmeat, perched on a block of avocado and crispy wontons. The PB&J is a spreadable mix of pate, bourbon and fig jam, served with toasted baguette slices. A lightly poached

Open: Lunch Monday to Saturday, dinner daily

Prices: Entrees \$16-\$49

Noise: Conversation-challenged

Other: Valet parking

Steak 48

615 N. Wabash Ave.
312-266-4848

www.steak48.com

Tribune rating: ★★

Open: Dinner daily

Prices: Steaks \$39-\$64; entrees \$29-\$54

Noise: Conversation-friendly

Other: Valet parking

egg crowns the Caesar salad, which features chilled chunks of romaine, huge croutons and an understated dressing.

When I hesitated between the salmon or tuna poke, my waiter offered a 50-50 mix, and that's the way you want to go. There's a nice contrast between the fish, which are accented with Thai chiles and spicy togarashi sauce.

A dozen and a half side dishes range from the expected (roasted sweet potatoes, creamed spinach) to the unusual (crab and shrimp mac and cheese, shishito peppers), and there's a twice-baked potato with Gouda, fontina and shaved truffles that's so smooth, it's like a sinfully rich pommes puree.

Desserts are in the ooey-gooey vein but aren't horrifically oversized (unlike many steakhouses). The warm vanilla cake, covered with vanilla ice cream and candied pecans, is a fine option, and occasionally the kitchen will send out a "beignet tree," upon which hang five sugar-dusted beignets. Having indulged in French Quarter beignets on more than a few occasions, I can attest to the quality of these. Nicely done.

Phil Vettel is a Tribune critic.

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