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Check In

The breathtaking lobby at Palmer House, the award-winning cuisine at Spiaggia (opposite page).

The storied hotels of Chicago—early-20th-century symbols of wealth and power—rival those of any destination. A few of these grand dames have undergone recent facelifts that make them worth a revisit. Add in their proximity to some of the finest dining anywhere, and you have a ready-made evening steeped in glamour. So take a little trip. And take our advice: The jaunt is best when the only person expecting your arrival is the concierge, and your only appointment is a dinner reservation.

BY BETH A. CLAYTON

Check Out



PHOTOGRAPHY BY NATHAN KIRKMAN

P

PERCHED AT THE CURVE where the city's Lake Shore Drive comes closest to Michigan Avenue is The Drake Hotel, among the most visible buildings in Chicago—and one of its grandest. Over its 90 years of operation, the stately 535-room building has become synonymous with cosmopolitan splendor—the first hotel in Chicago to put air-conditioning in all its rooms, as well as the first to boast color TVs. Along with a few of its sisters in the heart of the city, The Drake recently received an extensive renovation, a careful facelift that shows how old-school drama is one of the city's oldest—and newest—attractions.

Built in 1920 by brothers John and Tracy Drake, the Italian Renaissance-style hotel defined luxury on the Magnificent Mile. That was before the years began to take a toll, before other high-end spots opened in the 1970s, pulling clientele from the place that set the standard. After nearly \$60 million in renovations over the last decade or so, grandeur has returned.

Put on your party dress an hour before hitting the town and have a pre-dinner cocktail at the Palm Court—where the elegant vibe goes unmatched. Drinks are pricey, but how can you put a value on listening to delicate harp music while sipping a French martini (Grey Goose, raspberry liqueur, and pineapple juice) in the same room where Queen Elizabeth and the Empress of Japan have both had high tea?

For my purposes, though, the hotel's best quality is its proximity to Spiaggia, Tony Mantuano's award-winning restaurant, opened in 1984 and thought by many to be the best Italian restaurant in the country (and rumored to be Barack and Michelle Obama's favorite date place). It sits high above the intersection of Michigan Avenue and Oak Street, a beauty with softly glowing chandeliers, booths upholstered in muted metallic fabric, and menus printed on delicate vellum. Black-suited waitstaff carry on with the quiet confidence that comes

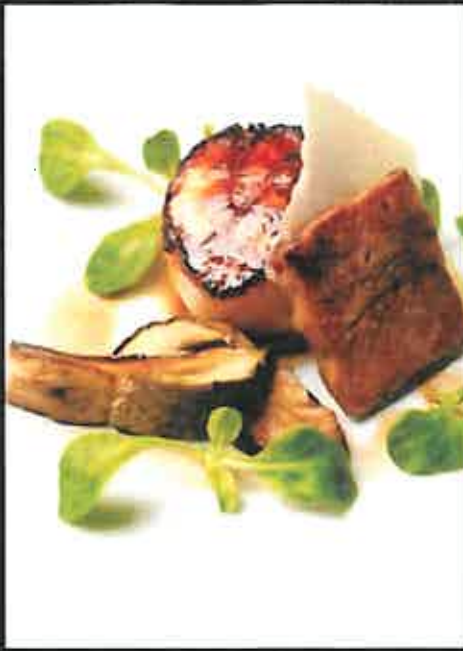
with knowing they are working for the best, though their flawless manners never cross the line into uppityness. Guys, wear your jackets: They are required here, but it will feel right. Few other restaurants can inspire this kind of formality.

From the *amuse bouche*, pistachio-topped halibut and mascarpone whip, to the finale, a dessert tray featuring blood-orange sorbet and chocolate mousse cupped in a delicate chocolate shell, it is evident that Spiaggia deserves its accolades. The classic three-course setup (there is also a seven-course tasting menu) offers anti-pasti courses like the *cappesanta dorata con pagliolaia e funghi*, a plump diver scallop paired with sauteed mushrooms and crispy beef dewlap (the tender stretch of meat beneath the animal's neck), and *carne cruda*, finely diced raw prime strip steak—flavored with white-truffle essence, celery, and Parmigiano-Reggiano on our visit. For the pasta course, gnocchi in ricotta sauce is a fine choice, though the most flavorful, tender veal we have ever tasted, wrapped in thin pasta and accented with crispy veal breast, won raves at the table.

The third-course selections of wood-roasted Alaskan halibut with earthy spring onions and red balsamic, and juicy duck breast lacquered with asfodelo honey, were enhanced by a bottle of Il Carbonaione 2004,

Sit back and sip in a dining room walled with windows, Lake Michigan glittering in the distance.





a bright Sangiovese, which we selected after patient guidance from sommelier Steven Alexander.

Alexander has put nearly as much time into the beverage offerings as Mantuano has into his menu. Beer choices include a well-edited roster of Italian crafts. But the wine list—brimming with hundreds of Italian options—is nothing short of awe-inspiring. Bottles, many of them unique to Spiaggia outside of Italy, range from around \$70 to well into the thousands. Let the expert help you navigate this one while you sit back and sip in a dining room walled with windows, Lake Michigan glittering in the distance.

W

WHILE EVERYTHING about The Drake and Spiaggia seems to implore you to lower your voice and mind your manners, the Blackstone hotel and its onsite tapas restaurant, Mercat a la Planxa, ask you, with a wink and a grin, to cut loose. The Second Empire, Beaux Arts-style structure was built by the Drake brothers a century ago (and a decade before their namesake hotel was erected)

Clockwise from top left: Choose your poison at the Palm Court in the bustling lobby of The Drake Hotel; wood-roasted diver scallop at Spiaggia; a formal welcome at The Drake; Spiaggia's beef carpaccio flavored with white-truffle essence; a scene from Chicago's urban jungle; dessert at Lockwood.

Chef. Though playing a Spanish (technically, Catalan) supporting role to Blackstone's all-American feel, the upscale-casual vibe of the place falls right in step. Reservations are a must, as are a few hours to kill; this isn't an experience you will want to rush through.

The chef's tasting menu is the way to go, and on our visit, selections included some predictable though flawlessly executed standbys—bacon-wrapped dates stuffed with almonds, and plump garlic shrimp—plus the more unexpected choices of butternut squash dumplings with lamb ragout, and butter-poached lobster with roasted pearl onions and vanilla. The experience was paired with three Spanish wines (Jose Perente 2008, Gine Gine 2006, and Castillo de Monseran 2006), though the extensive liquor list is worth poring over, as it includes four varieties of absinthe, sipping tequilas, bourbons, and Scotch.

T

THE TRANSFORMATION at Palmer House, standing strong in downtown Chicago's Loop, is nothing short of miraculous, and great pains were taken to preserve the hotel's opulence, as opposed to just updating it. This could be called the granddaddy of all restorations, spanning several years and costing \$170 million—not to mention the fact that the hotel hasn't ceased operations since it opened its doors, making it the longest continuously operating hotel in the country. The sheer size of the place is a marvel: 1,639 rooms, a penthouse suite, a 4,898-square-foot fitness center, and several floors of meeting and banquet space all received a makeover during the massive update.

Built by businessman Potter Palmer as a wedding gift to his wife, Bertha Honore Palmer, the hotel first opened at the corner of State and Monroe streets in 1871, but burnt to the ground just 13 days later in the Great Chicago Fire. It was rebuilt in 1873—this time using virtually fireproof iron and brick. The seven-story structure boasts many firsts: the first use of lightbulbs in a hotel and the first hotel to “employ telephones in every room” among them. In the 1920s, perhaps as a response to the real-estate boom in Chicago that ushered in other grand hotels, a 25-story addition was built adjacent to the existing structure. At the time, the complex was touted as the largest hotel in the world.

The Palmer House lobby is a dizzying hodgepodge of overstuffed furniture and flamboyant light fixtures, a working diorama of history and architecture. The room boasts 21 ceiling murals painted in the 1920s by French muralist Louis Pierre Rigal and

24-karat gold Tiffany chandeliers. Schedule a tour of the place to check out the hotel's private ballrooms and suites. After all, they just don't build 'em like they used to.

Cocktails are served in the lobby, but the constant bustle makes it hard to kick back. Instead, head to Potter's Lounge, a neon-lit boîte toward the rear of the hotel, added during the most recent phase of renovations. The spot is in keeping with the early-20th-century theme. Walls are adorned with photographs from performers who played at the hotel's Empire Room, which opened in 1933. The menu here leans in the uber-trendy direction (Kobe sliders and sushi pizza); for a meal, head across the lobby.

The onsite restaurant, named Lockwood in honor of Bertha Palmer's younger brother, overcomes some of the classic challenges hotel restaurants face: a lack of windows, no outside entrances, and poor insulation from the noise of the busy lobby. Stately pillars denote an entrance, and a long, narrow waiting area with high cocktail tables creates a nice buffer for the more formal dining area beyond. Though the restaurant's look is built around sleek lines and minimalist furniture, in stark contrast to the elaborate style of the lobby, there remains a sense of continuity here. Tiffany candelabras bear amber resin lampshades, and a collection of crystal decanters sits daintily in a curio cabinet, in a nod to the hotel's timeless beauty.



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Headed by chef Phillip Foss (formerly of Le Cirque and the Quilted Giraffe in New York), the menu sometimes gives a tongue-in-cheek nod to more humble fare, like the “buffalo-ed” wing, stuffed with Great Hills bleu cheese, celery emulsion, candied walnuts, and a spicy dipping sauce, or the “chokes and chicken,” a benign dish with artichokes, potato, wild mushrooms, and spinach. Rabbit ragout was a little bland on one visit, though a thick, black-pepper-seasoned ribeye, sporting just a quarter-inch of browned meat before giving way to the tender, medium-rare flesh, was a thing of beauty. The duck, sourced from Indiana's Gunthorp Farms and served with creamed corn, Michigan peaches, and grilled radicchio, was regional fare done right.

Finish your meal with Bertha's walnut-studded brownie. Legend has it that Bertha Palmer helped invent the brownie by insisting on giving the ladies attending the 1892 Columbian Exposition something smaller than a piece of cake and easy to eat from a lunch box. In reality, the origin of the brownie is unknown, with the first recipe appearing in the 1896 *Boston Cooking-School Cookbook*. But why let the truth get in the way of a good story—especially when it has a sweet, apricot-glazed ending? ●