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## THE STEW

A taste of Chicago's food, wine and dining scene

By Chicago Tribune's Good Eating and Dining staffs

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### **Crowds too big at your usual eatery? Meet the neighbors**

*Posted by Phil Vettel at 10:00 a.m. CDT*

Just as sites such as the John Hancock Center and Navy Pier draw a disproportionate degree of tourist attention, so do certain restaurants stay "hot" while nearby and worthy dining rooms draw less notice.

So here are three "other" restaurants, handy for tourists looking for a new thrill and useful for locals who don't want to wait two hours for a table but also don't want to re-park the car.

#### **If you've done Scoози! ... try Club Lago**

I greatly admire how Scoози! (410 W. Huron St.; 312-943-5900) has managed to keep itself fresh and interesting after more than 20 years; there's a reason this place continues to draw crowds for its modern Italian cuisine.

But why not consider a place that's been drawing customers for 55 years? Club Lago started in 1952 and it's still going strong today under Giancarlo and Guido Nardini, grandsons of the restaurant's founder.

"We're old-school Chicago Italian-American," says Giancarlo Nardini. "Our portions are a little larger than they should be, we have meat with our pastas. But this has worked for over 50 years."

The look is basic -- simple wood tables surrounded by green and red walls -- but the food is hearty, approachable and good.

Skip the fried appetizers and opt for the baked clams, or go straight for entrees such as tender veal marsala, done with porcini and domestic mushrooms and finished with a fine sweet-wine sauce. The same dish enhanced with artichoke hearts is called veal Sassi, a dish that Club Lago claims as its own. Chicken Flair, an homage to longtime customer Lee Flaherty, layers chicken breast with eggplant, prosciutto and fontina

cheese, and it's terrific.

It's hard to spend a lot on food, because just about everything is less than \$18. It's just as hard to overspend on wine; Club Lago offers a minuscule selection, but every bottle is \$20. Club Lago, 331 W. Superior St.; 312-951-2849.

### **If you've done Avec ... try De Cero**

The only thing wrong with Avec (615 W. Randolph St.; 312-377-2002) is its size. This clever small-plates concept has got about half as many seats as it has hopeful diners on any given night, there's no place to wait except outside and the restaurant doesn't accept reservations.

If you run into a 90-plus-minute wait, consider leaving your car where it is and walking a few blocks west to De Cero, a rustic-looking modern taqueria (the name loosely translates to "from scratch") that offers the usual assortment of appetizers and entrees (among the former are irresistible duck nachos).

But the real appeal of this 150-seater is the innovative list of tacos, sold individually and priced from \$3 to \$4.50.

Which is a bit pricey as taquerias go, but most taquerias don't offer tomatillo-seasoned pork tacos, nor medium-rare tuna tacos with habanero salsa. Even the skirt-steak taco is dressed up with fingerling potatoes and chipotle mayonnaise.

If you want to make a meal of tacos, pick any eight varieties for \$29. Wash them down with any of 10 margaritas or the two dozen sipping tequilas. De Cero, 814 W. Randolph St.; 312-455-8114.

### **If you've done RL ... try Devon Seafood Grill**

RL (115 E. Chicago Ave.; 312-475-1100) is justifiably popular for its old-school upscale American menu, highlighted by excellent beef and lamb dishes. But two blocks to the west is Devon (rhymes with Kevin) Seafood Grill, a concept by the Houlihan's Restaurant Group.

Generally, it isn't difficult to get a table here (call ahead anyway), though the bar scene is usually hopping, thanks to items such as the \$5.95 Martini of the Day and, during Happy Hour (4-7 p.m. and 9 p.m.-midnight, Wednesdays and Thursdays), a slew of bar appetizers for just \$5 each.

The below-street-level dining room is windowless, but has a cool, masculine interior created with dark wood, low lighting and clusters of low-back booths. The open kitchen is a surprise, adding noise and glare to a dining room that doesn't seem to want it; the best tables are those farthest from the kitchen action.

You'll pay \$22 to \$25 for a piece of fish, but the quality is there. And you won't pay anything for the addictive buttermilk drop biscuits that arrive at the table shortly after you do. Almond-crusted tilapia is a signature item, and a good one; the almonds grace but don't overwhelm the mild fish. Macadamia-topped grouper is a good idea, but our sample over-lingered in the broiler and some of the crust got scorched.

Sweet steamed mussels in a garlicky broth are a good starter, as are plump scallops sprinkled with fried prosciutto bits. Finish with a decent Key Lime pie or the respectable chocolate lava cake. Devon Seafood Grill, 39 E. Chicago Ave.; 312-440-8660.