Steakhouses for the holidays

3 new spots join crowded category

By Phil Vettel
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There are more difficult challenges in life than selling high-end steak 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 (just 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 concepts 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 rooftop level and the outdoor dining areas on the lower levels? In support of the "Italia" suffix, the restaurant offers a trio of cruschi, available individually or in combination. Striped bass tou-
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ched with lava salt, king salmon belly with tiny bursts of finger lime, tuna with oyster creme — 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.

Waters 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 casarecce noodles with full-flavored asparagus, ricotta and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, and it was wonderful.

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

The steak selection has been enhanced with some grass-fed Australian beef (aged 72 days, we're told) and A1 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 toil 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...
made its debut in town, 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 Cooper, who oversees both operations, has made sure that the most popular items downtown are part of the suburban menu. The ultra-indulgent garlic chabatta dipping in blue cheese fondue is here, as is the maple-glazed bacon appetizer. The crab cakes is a smaller and less pricey than the "crab cake" downtown (and just $19, rather than $28), but it's a nice crab cake, supported nicely by a Meyer-lemon aioli.

There are fewer steaks on the west-suburban menu, but the prime Delmonico steak (the one with MJ's personal seal of approval) with garlic-basil butter 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 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 respecting. There's a baseball-size wagyu-style meatball served in enough rich tomato sauce to make up the inclusion of toasted bread. 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 are made at least partially from actual barrel staves, and action photos of Hadi Amin's abode. An attached coffee bar offers grab-and-go pastry, sandwich and salad options at breakfast, 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, dribbling some wine onto 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 jalapeños (not mentioned 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 US, 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 — has 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 pourers.

Wet-aged prime steaks — offered in small (9- to 12-ounce) and regular (22- to 22-ounce) cuts — are without flaw, served on 100-degree plates that ensure your beef won't lose temperature anytime soon. I'm actually not a fan of plates hot enough to warn my eyebrows, but I acknowledge some customers appreciate that sort of thing.) Plenty of topping options range from the simple (blue cheese, truffle) to the extravagant (black truffle lobster, $35). Fun starters include cream cheese en croute on a block of avocado and crispy wontons. The PB&J is a spreadable mix of pate, bourbon and figs, served with toasted baguette slices. A lightly poached 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 it to go. There's a nice contrast between the fish, which are accented with Thai chilies and spicy togarashi sauce.

A dozen selection of half-size 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 shelled truffles that's so smooth, it's like a sinful rich pommes puree. Deserts are in theocracy vein but aren't horridly 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.