

BEHIND THE SCENES AT JAM

RedEye spent a Sunday morning at Jam. Here are the highlights. **KENT GREEN**

Jessica Lane, Jam's pastry chef, preps for the day's service. All this happens after a portion of Sunday's work was already done: Chef Jeff Mauro said brunch is unique in that lots of prep happens the day before. Otherwise, workers would need to show up at 3 a.m.

5:30 to 7 a.m.

The first customers walk in, a young couple and their little boy. The restaurant is quiet and lit with soft morning light.

7:27

Tables have been filling and emptying regularly, and now the first line starts to form, stretching from the register to the door.

9:16

Owner Jerry Suqi checks in on one of the tables. "How is everything?" he asks a woman who's just finished.

10:13

"Oh," she says, closing her eyes and re-savoring everything she just ate. "I think I love you."

Suqi smiles and points to Mauro over the counter—at Jam, the kitchen is visible to the whole dining area. "Actually it's him," Suqi says. "You love him." The woman waves; Mauro nods, then gets back to work.

RedEye decides to trail server Erwin Alvizures, which is kind of like trying to catch a bumblebee with a tail wind. Even when he has a free moment, he doesn't. He checks in on other tables, takes dirty dishes to the back and, of course, keeps coffee mugs full.

10:30

RedEye gives up on trailing Alvizures. When server Sarah Reed hears this, she's incredulous.

10:43

"What do you mean?" she asks. "This is a slow day."

Wait times are at 45 minutes for two people, an hour for larger parties. Hostess/cashier JoAnne Weiman plays the same role in a succession of mini-dramas. If she tells people the wait and their heads roll back, eyes wide, Weiman's probably getting a "Thanks, but we'll pass." But if they look to each other and shrug, then they'll go out for a walk and come back. There's no way to predict which wait duration will be acceptable to each party, Weiman said.

10:58

Mauro (left) and Noll
BRIAN J. MOROWCZYNSKI
FOR REDEYE



Mauro and sous chef Mike Noll prepare one of Jam's specialties: Pacific ono and pineapple gnocchi, drizzled with a pecan emulsion. As with every dish, it's done with reverence: Each piece of gnocchi is placed just so and topped with a basil leaf, forming a ring around the two biscuit-sized cuts of ono.

11:32

Jam's machine hums along: Lane prepping the food, Mauro and Noll perfecting each dish, the servers keeping plates on tables and Suqi running it all. Things are just getting started: "Next comes the lunch rush," Suqi says.

11:40

The early show

This brunch brought to you through a choreographed—and delicious—dance

By Kent Green

FOR REDEYE

Coffee, check. Eggs, check. Freshly squeezed O.J., check. Oh, and don't forget the bacon.

For the chefs, cooks and servers who are part of what can only be called Chicago's weekend brunch machine, this checklist is a familiar early morning ritual.

As more restaurants open or add brunch service to accommodate Chicagoans' seemingly insatiable appetite for all things eggy and syrup-drenched, the city's early-bird club is growing.

At Jam, a 34-seat breakfast and lunch cafe in Ukrainian Village, the brunch-o-nomics on a Sunday involve 5 pounds of coffee, up to 400 eggs, a staff of 12 and about 150 patrons, according to owner Jerry Suqi.

Though it's new to Chicago's already-packed brunch scene, Jam, which opened in July, has caught on quickly, with peak wait times that can reach more than an hour on weekends.

Rule No. 1 of brunch service, according to Erwin Alvizures, a server at Jam: "Make sure that everybody has coffee." RedEye learned this after spending a recent Sunday behind the scenes at Jam.

Rule No. 2: When it comes to working brunch, night owls need not apply—unless you're OK going on a few hours of sleep.

Jessica Lane, Jam's pastry chef, shows up to work around 5:30 a.m. on Sundays to prep for the restaurant's 7 a.m. opening. She and other workers spend that time squeezing orange juice, making brioches and shaping meat patties.

Lane and the other Jam workers told RedEye they didn't mind the hours. The work, they said, is just like the rest of the restaurant industry, the shift is just earlier in the day. Many said they like having finished work by the early afternoon.

Those early mornings can be challenging, though.

"My first few tables are a little rough," Rachael Smith, a server at Jam, told RedEye. "I'm always like, 'I'm supposed to be in bed right now.'"

Servers working brunch probably feel the most pressure—brunch patrons often want quicker service than at other meals, said Will Duncan, a bartender at Ukrainian Village's Empty Bottle. Empty Bottle began serving week-

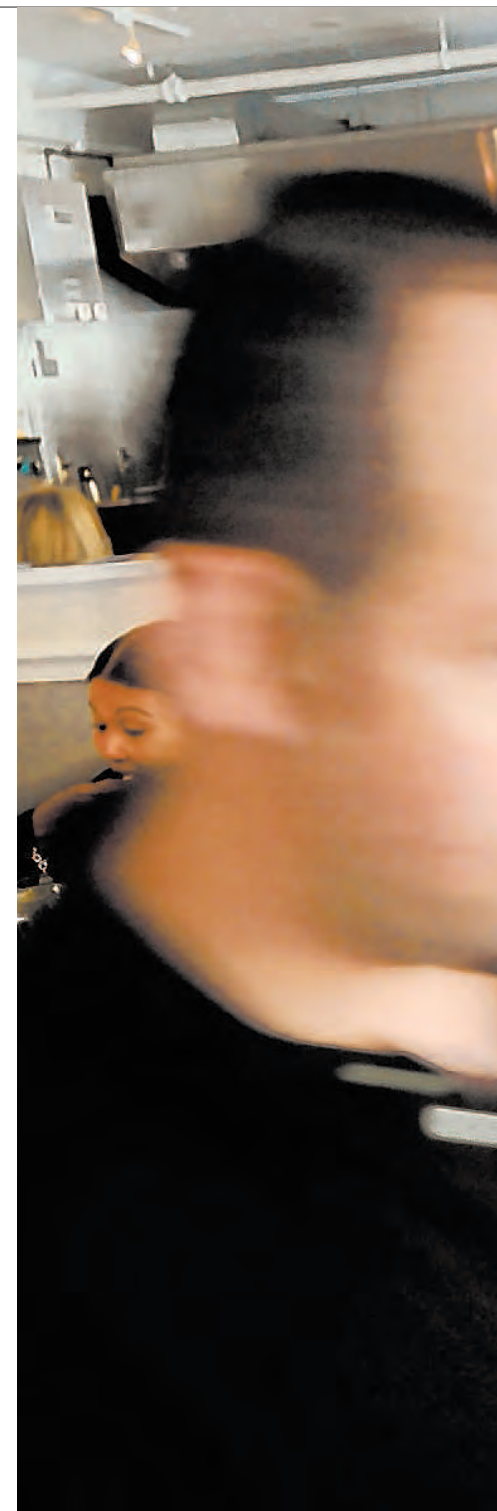
end brunch from the adjoining Bite Cafe at the beginning of 2009.

"I've worked brunch at a lot of different restaurants, and it's such a faster pace, quicker table times and more turnover," Duncan said. "The expectation is [the food will] be there within 10 minutes. So you just gotta be prompt; you gotta be quick."

At Jam, a line starts to form around 9:45 a.m.; by 11 a.m., the line is stretching out the door.

While Jam's staffers said they feel the pressure, they don't let it affect them (or at least they didn't let it show). To the casual observer, the upshift in the staff's work pace is noticeable.

Dealing with different types of food can make brunch more challenging for restaurants that don't specialize in it, especially if they have a large customer base, said Carly





Server Erwin Alvizures passes by brunch-goer Rose Perez at the crowded Jam, a recently opened breakfast and lunch cafe in Ukrainian Village.

BRIAN J. MOROWCZYNSKI
FOR REDEYE

Some bright ideas

Even if you're a frequent weekend bruncher, there's no excuse for getting stuck in a brunch rut in this town. New brunches pop up nearly every weekend. Here are four worth checking out; none is more than 3 weeks old.

M. KATHLEEN PRATT, METROMIX DINING PRODUCER

Chaise Lounge

1840 W. North Ave. 773-342-1840

Chef Cary Taylor puts brunch spins on some of his favorite menu items (fried green tomato Benedict, scrambled egg-avocado-black bean morning tacos, a breakfast burger and more) at this Bucktown restaurant and lounge's week-old Sparkling Sunday Brunch. There's a build-your-own bloody and bellini bar too. Brunch served 2-5 p.m. Sunday.

Eve

840 N. Wabash Ave. 312-266-3383

The Gold Coast gets a new brunch option this weekend when chef Troy Graves rolls out a menu that includes buttermilk fried chicken over a tasso ham waffle with crawfish gravy and brioche french toast with spiced apple chutney. Brunch served 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.



Nightwood

2119 S. Halsted St. 312-526-3385

Pilsen's new hot spot from the team behind Lula Cafe, which already has serious brunch cred with its Logan Square neighbors, launched its own brunch three weeks ago. Chef de cuisine Jason Vincent's seasonally focused menu varies from week to week, but early hits include chicken and waffles (served last weekend with stone fruit compote) and homemade chocolate doughnuts. Brunch served 9 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Sunday.

Nana

3267 S. Halsted St. 312-929-2486

This new Bridgeport breakfast and lunch spot (a.k.a. brunch spot) has been packed since it opened less than two weeks ago. We suspect it has something to do with the casserole-style chilaquiles, Liege waffles and something called a Nanadict: a pupusa (cheese-stuffed corn flatbread) topped with chorizo, poached eggs and poblano sauce. Brunch served 8 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

» Find more new brunches and dozens of reviews in our brunch guide at metromix.com.



Fisher, founder and editor-in-chief of the Chicago Brunch Blog. Fisher started the blog a year ago to offer reviews, news and events related to the city's brunch scene.

"Brunch-specific places like Orange, Yolk and Bongo Room are able to work with a set menu and have a pretty good idea by now what their traffic is like," Fisher wrote in an e-mail. "Other restaurants have to balance a heavy brunch rush with the rest of their supply."

Not every brunch place runs at a fast pace. The brunch experience at Simone's in Pilsen is a bit more laid-back. Manager Erica Schimmel said customers like it because they know they can easily get a seat.

However, she added that one menu item always

needs to be served with haste: eggs, because they tend to cool off more quickly than other foods.

For Suqi, the appeal of getting into the brunch game had to do with bringing the quality of dinner foods to mornings.

"It's a real devotion to bringing that culinary craftsmanship that's been previously reserved for dinner to breakfast," he said.

At that point, it was about 11:45 a.m. and Jam's machine hummed along. The plates of food kept moving. Suqi ran it all, barking orders one minute, happily chatting with diners the next.

Despite the early hours and the perpetual hustle, Alvizures, one of the servers, says he enjoys the brunch crush.

"If it wasn't fun, I wouldn't do it," he said.

Jam

937 N. Damen Ave.

7 a.m. to 3 p.m., Wednesday through Monday, closed Tuesday

Empty Bottle

1035 N. Western Ave.

Brunch menu: Noon to 3 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays

Simone's

960 W. 18th St.

Brunch menu: 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays