

KEEFER'S ★★★20 W. Kinzie; (312) 467-9525;
www.keefersrestaurant.com**Prices:** Appetizers and salads, \$6.95-\$14.95; steaks, \$25.95-\$45.95; seafood and chicken, \$21.95-\$36.95; desserts, \$4.95-\$7.95.**Try:** Mussels, smoked salmon, steak frites, halibut, chocolate cake.**Wheels:** Valet (\$12). Wheelchair accessible.**In a bite:** A thoroughly modern steakhouse that has comfort and character. The layout is such that even when the restaurant is full the noise level is acceptable, so carrying on a conversation is a piece of cake. In season, the outdoor dining space (one of the largest around) is rife with the see-and-be-seen scene. Service is steakhouse savvy and without attitude or attempts to send your tab up the flagpole. Not good for children. Reservations suggested. The wine list is a winner, especially the wines by the glass.**KEY:** ★★★★★ Extraordinary; ★★★ Excellent; ★★ Very Good; ★ Good; Zero stars: Poor**The malted custard French toast is not to be missed, with its flavor boosted by malted custard, the stone fruit, lime leaf cream and pink peppercorn.** | KEITH HALE ~ SUN-TIMES PHOTOS**The "Jamburger" boasts a double patty of beef, butterkase cheese and a perfectly cooked egg, sunnyside up. A rubble of seasoned fries comes along for the \$10 price.**

Jam packs 'em in with great fare, style

BY PAT BRUNO

Jam is one mighty good restaurant. Maybe "restaurant" is not the right word, because Jam serves only breakfast and lunch (it closes at 3 p.m.), so the word "eatery" comes to mind. No, that's not right. Calling Jam an eatery would be like calling Michelangelo a painter. You can't really call a place that slides an amuse-bouche at you an eatery, now can you?

Chef Jeffrey Mauro did time at Charlie Trotter's, so trotting out little nibbles before the main course does seem amusing in this setting, but it's all about making a first impression with something unexpected. (And the tall guy inspecting each plate as it comes off the line is Jerry Suqi of Chickpea restaurant on West Chicago Avenue.)

In another context, Jam might be an apt appellation, because both times I was there the place was jam-packed. But then there are not a lot of tables either, and the open kitchen is pretty much in your face (not a criticism) if you are sitting along the south wall of the elbow-shaped room. You definitely get to know your eating neighbors.

One side of the menu (a strip of weighty paper) lists what's for breakfast and the other side is all about lunch. All of that adds up to something like eight choices for lunch and twice that many for breakfast, so I will start there.

Do not miss the malted custard French toast. Two slabs of bread, impressively thick and a mottled golden hue, had been transformed into a beautiful duet so delectably light and flavorful it made regular French toast pale in comparison. Savor the malted custard, the stone fruit, lime leaf cream and pink peppercorn of this delectable treat for a mere \$10. A small pitcher of warm maple syrup gilded this lily of a dish and then some.

But wait. I couldn't resist pairing the French toast with what the menu calls "(Three)dom of choice." Pick any three sides for eight bucks. I chose (for my French toast accompaniment) cotechino sausage (hunks of pure Italian sausage pleasure), braised pork cheeks (falling-apart tender and flavorful pork) and fingerling potatoes (tender roasted halves that give breakfast potatoes a new meaning). OK, so it was an

JAM ★★★937 N. Damen; (773) 489-0302;
www.jamrestaurant.com**Prices:** Breakfast, \$3-\$12; lunch, \$5-\$10; kids, \$6. (Cash only)**Try:** Malted custard French toast, cotechino sausage, braised pork cheeks, fingerling potatoes, corn soup, Jamburger.**Wheels:** Street parking. Wheelchair accessible.**In a bite:** High-end, creative, impressive, relatively inexpensive breakfast and lunch fare with a flair that goes beyond the ordinary. Be warned that the place is small (one room with open kitchen), and on peak weekend hours the word "jammed" comes immediately to mind. Service is a little laid-back but good, and when every table is full, the small kitchen is a bit taxed, but the wait is more than worth it. The kids menu is not an afterthought. No reservations accepted.**KEY:** ★★★★★ Extraordinary; ★★★ Excellent; ★★ Very Good; ★ Good; Zero stars: Poor

\$18 breakfast, but there would be plenty for two people to split.

From the lunch menu, I can highly recommend two dishes in particular. The luscious corn soup (poured tableside) is all jazzed up with fennel pollen, smoked paprika and red pepper. Quite delicious. And following that it was the "Jamburger," a beauty of a feast. A double patty of beef, cooked nicely medium-rare, was held together by a veneer of rich Butterkase cheese (that name alone makes a statement), and on top of the burger was an egg — sunnyside to the point of smiling. Add a properly hefty bun, a rubble of seasoned french fries (excellent), and I say it doesn't get much better than this \$10 burger that rocked.

Other lunch fare includes salads (octopus, arugula), roasted chicken, sandwiches (Italian sub, turkey club). And the kid's menu is not a throwaway — boasting pancakes, eggs, chicken drumsticks, grilled cheese sandwich with fries.

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I got the standard cut (which I assume was the case), it was almost too much to finish. This steak was unbelievably rich with flavor and deep-down goodness (some of that flavor was the work of the maitre d'hotel butter oozing on top). The price was \$25.95, which some might suggest is kind of high for steak frites, but I had no beef whatsoever with the price for this delicious steak. And the frites? I have had better, but that's just me being picky.

The kitchen got it right with the pan-roasted halibut, as well. The generously sized fillet rode atop a succotash that was peppered with smoked bacon. And alongside that was a rubble of sauteed wild mushrooms. It was all about the clean-tasting fish with flavor counterpoints of earthy mushrooms and the mildly sweet succotash. I couldn't have enjoyed it more.

A dessert not to miss is the warm chocolate cake. Yes, I know, chocolate cake with a melted chocolate center has been done to death, but this cake moved me into a good place. In the shape of a mini-bundt cake, I could tell by its appearance — richly dark with a gloss of chocolate sauce dripping down and around it — that I was about to cut into something good. And it was.

The carrot cake had some tasty moments, too — the two layers of cake light in texture and gently sweet with a pleasing light cream cheese frosting.

Pat Bruno is a local free-lance critic and author. E-mail bruno@bruno.com. Listen to Pat Bruno talk about food and wine Tuesdays at 6:23 p.m. and 10:23 p.m. and Saturdays and Sundays at 7:53 p.m. on WBBM News Radio 780-AM.

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