

## Prairie power



By Michael Philippi  
Ungaretti & Harris • Restaurant Critic

**J**ust one signature item can define a restaurant. The Brown Derby gave us Cobb salad. Raffles gave us the Singapore sling. Prairie Fire will be known as the home of the sticky toffee date cake. More on that later.

Prairie Fire is in the Beaux-Arts Power House Building, five minutes from the Loop. This triangular cream-colored stone structure looks like the Flatiron Building in New York and is no less historically important. Once the power generation facility for the Chicago and North-west Railroad, the building's huge boilers and dynamos provided electricity and steam power to the terminal and passenger cars.

A hundred-plus years later, it must look a lot different and a lot more welcoming. It opens into a comfortable bar area that spills into the dining room — not huge, but plenty big. The interior is dark wood, muted colors with Frank Lloyd Wright-style angles throughout.

High-backed perimeter booths provide privacy for business lunches or just conspiratorial discussions of what to order next. Torchieres are a nice touch, complementing the ample natural light from the huge arched windows. The menu bills itself as American comfort food and hits the mark pretty consistently.

It's a good sign when, as soon as you sit down, someone brings you warm, crusty, coarse French bread. The soup of our day was tomato basil bisque, which came with a crouton-style slice of the same bread and was as rich and buttery as the day outside was cold and wintry. In fact, that can be said for the whole experience — warm and comfortable inside with a bird's-eye view of cold and nasty on the other side of the pane.

Greek fries are served with oregano and feta cheese, with a little vinegar. The wings were good, but not really spicy as described, still solid, which is key in the comfort food department.

We also tried tempura shrimp and the duck pate. The delicate tempura batter covers big, tender shrimp. This same batter is used on the fish and chips entrée, and worked well with the tilapia filets — we had to ask for malt vinegar, but once requested it appeared pretty quickly.

I would pass on the duck pate — two nice, big slices served with cognac-marinated prunes (which were amazing), but sort of flat and not particularly creamy or flavorful.

The star of the entrée selection is the sirloin burger, served without a bun, with a big slab of blue (or cheddar) cheese along with thick-cut grilled tomatoes and purple onions. This has been billed at the best burger in town and it is easy to concur with that verdict. Losing the bun is brilliant and the beef is grass-fed from Bill Kurtis' ranch (yes, Bill Kurtis is a rancher — who knew?).

They also offer an omelet of the day: ours was Italian sausage, poblano pepper and mozzarella cheese. It was generously sized and perfectly prepared.

The lunch menu offers a choice of six salads, all assembled from fresh, local produce. The chopped Greek was a nice twist — your basic Greek salad but with baked feta and all chopped up for easy eating. The organic mixed greens salad is more interesting than it sounds, with crumbled cheese, walnut, pear and fig compote.

And then there was the warm sticky toffee date cake.

Sure, the crème brulee was great and the double chocolate cake could cause a diabetic coma, but the star of the show is the sticky date cake. This is a round spice cake served fresh from the oven, drizzled with toffee sauce and topped with vanilla ice cream. The edges are crisp, and the middle is moist. When the ice

cream and toffee are mixed together it doesn't get much better.

This is the rare new place that has its act together. It has great food, and a relaxed atmosphere that musters a neighborhood feel on the edge of the Loop.

**Lagniappe:** I had never been to Goose Island until recently. What a mistake. Let's call the food high-end bar fare. Let's call the beer experience spectacular. All of us wannabe foodies have a few parlor tricks that get us through a wine list, but beer pairings? Goose will help you with small glasses of different brews they put together with small plates. You just might like it and, put to practice, will shave a couple \$100 off your dinner tabs.

**Traveler's Tip:** I took a deposition at the Newark airport Marriott last month. Seriously. I usually snag the warm-weather trips in winter, never Newark. I really need to get back on my game. They do eat in Newark, though, and sometimes they eat in neighboring Elizabeth at Algarve Restaurant. Yes, I was a little dubious, but what I found was a great bar/restaurant serving icy cold beers and piping hot pots of Portuguese food. The menu is shockingly deep, full of fresh seafood and grilled meats. We opted for the traditional Paella Valenciana for two, which is apparently Portuguese for giant, impossible-to-finish cast iron pots of mussels, shrimp, fish, lobster, clams and pork in a spicy tomato sauce. ■

### Pleadings:

Prairie Fire  
215 N. Clinton, Chicago  
312-382-8300

### Court costs for dinner:

Appetizers: \$6-\$12  
Entrees: \$13.50-\$39

**Verdict:** 

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