

BAR BIZ/KITCHEN SPY STYLE MEETS VOLUME AT THE WIT HOTEL IN CHICAGO, WHERE ROOF AND CIBO MATTO ARE TURNING UP THE HEAT ON THE LOCAL BAR/DINING SCENE. KELLEY McCLAIN AND BEVERLY STEPHEN REPORT.

If you want to hit a home run in Chicago, it's hard to go wrong with a rooftop bar and an Italian restaurant. The new Wit hotel, a boutique Doubletree with 298 rooms, has both and then some. **Roof**, a spectacular indoor/outdoor bar, has nonstop views of Chicago's magnificent skyline. **Cibo Matto**, a stylish Italian restaurant on the second floor, seats 142. **State and Lake**, named for the historic intersection in the heart of the Loop, is a street-level tavern seating 110 with a thoughtfully drafted list of American regional and international beers and a more casual menu. The **Phoenix Lounge**, yet another bar/lounge area with its own small menu, forms the mezzanine space that overlooks the Wit lobby. And hordes of guests stream from one to the other from about 5 p.m. on till the wee hours. On a super busy night thousands might visit Roof, and many of them are either having a drink before dinner or after dinner at Cibo Matto.

An express elevator from the hotel lobby bypasses the usual distractions to deliver guests directly to the 27th floor Roof:



Previous pages: Roof's scenic Patio Bar flows seamlessly into the covered Living Room with floor-to-ceiling windows. Photo by Wayne Cable. Pizzas hot from the Wood Stone oven take center stage on the menu. Photo by Anthony Tahlier. Above: Cocktails are as refreshing as the plain air setting. Photo by Anthony Tahlier. An enticing view of the backbar bottle skyline. Photo by Wayne Cable.

7,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor lounge space with fantastic city views, including Millennium Park, Marina Towers, and Lake Michigan. Surrounded by floor-to-ceiling glass windows with a vaulted ceiling, the center Living Room space features three bars, a seven-foot-tall double-sided fireplace, a wood-burning oven, and a grand piano. The modern décor is dressed in a muted palette of charcoal gray, black, and ivory with touches of turquoise. The Overlook, an intimate private outdoor space that comfortably holds 20 to 45 people, includes the Hangover, a table for eight set on a platform extension.

At 3:30 p.m. on a Friday in late spring, the sun is shining and the already buzzing Patio Bar is getting a sweet sample of summertime heat. That crowd is made up of local food and wine loving types, drawing business and club crowds on weeknights and older crowds from the suburbs on the weekends. About 20 percent of business is hotel guests, and nightcaps after *Cibo Matto* are popular. Spring showers? No worry here. Guests find quick cover in the Living Room. After, the outdoor bar is quickly dried and primed for action. Mixologist **Jonny Abens** is on hand to cater to the thirsty hordes.

Expectations are high. Abens brings 10 years' bartending experience to Roof, having been mentored by the likes of **Kevin Kelpé** at *Red Feather Lounge* in Boise, Idaho ("he brought New York City to Boise") and at Atlanta's *Trois* by **Eric Simpkins** (currently with *Drinkshop* at *W Atlanta-Downtown*). Abens would prefer to squeeze juices fresh to order—and on a slow night might still do so, but with covers reaching 800 to 1,500 on weekends and a sales volume that can soar to \$40,000, he instead sources fresh juices and purees from a local purveyor, and stocks commercial staples like Ocean Spray cranberry, Fresca, and Sacramento tomato juice

"because we have to." He sweetens drinks with honey, agave nectar, and turbinado simple syrup, makes his own pomegranate grenadine, and uses regionally produced spirits whenever possible.

Sales break out to two parts spirits and one part each beer, wine, and food. Predictably, 60 percent of drinks ordered are tried and true cocktails, 40 percent signatures. That list changes with the seasons, based on Abens' adherence to a "classic formula with modern cool, sexy twists," substituting regional spirits, syrups, and bitters. Executive chef **Todd Stein's** menus also influence the list, and Abens works with the general managers at *Cibo Matto* and *State and Lake* to concoct drinks that complement their menus.

Roof's rotating selection of small plates that includes pizzas (funghi: roasted oyster mushrooms, mozzarella, thyme; salsiccia: house-made sausage, cured tomato, fennel, havarti); baked fresh ricotta with grilled country bread and marinated grape toma-

Equipment

- Blenders** Vita-Mix
- Cheese melter** Southbend
- Combi oven** Alto-Shaam
- Fryer** Pitco
- Ice machines** Kold-Draft
- Mixers** Hobart
- Pasta boiler** Pitco
- Pizza oven** Wood Stone
- Ranges** Southbend
- Refrigeration** True
- Slicer** Berkel

toes; rock shrimp crostini with white bean puree and parsley salad; grilled lamb burgers with minted cucumber dressing and tomato *marmalata*; PLT (pancetta, cured tomato, arugula, lemon aioli); apple crumble with caramel sauce and vanilla cream.

Signature cocktails run from Spiced Pears & Honey (Grey Goose Poire, honey, fresh lemon) to Sex on the Roof (Hangar 1, St. Germain, Aperol, orange, cranberry) to the Scofflaw (Maker's Mark, lemon, grenadine, dry vermouth, orange bitters). Beer ranges from locally sourced Goose Island 312 wheat ale (Chicago), Two Brothers Bitter End pale ale (Warrenville, IL), Three Floyds Pride & Joy pale ale (Munster, IN), and Dark Horse Black Bier strong ale (Marshall, MI). California's Anderson Valley Boont Amber, Bud Light, and Stella Artois from Belgium round out the selection.

Cibo Matto translates roughly as crazy food but "crazy place" would be more accurate because it's crazy busy and the only thing crazy about the food is how good it is.

Stein, who earned his stripes at such stellar Chicago eateries as Gordon and mK, fell in love with Italy and married his culinary skills with his passion in the Italo-centric menu at Cibo Matto. Not surprisingly, his bucatini carbonara is a runaway best seller. He dusts it with pecorino and breaks a duck egg over the top. "Might as well gild the lily," he says, noting that he believes a chef only gets one or two signatures and this is his. Grilled whole fish and braised short ribs compete for the spotlight as well. Several salads are based on mozzarella and its menu-darling-of-the-moment cousin, *burrata*: beets and *burrata*, prosciutto and buffalo mozzarella with rhubarb puree and pickled rhubarb.

His menu is relatively simple—five pastas, seven entrées—but the intense volume keeps the workhorse kitchen cranking. The open kitchen is to the right as guests enter the restaurant and encounter the 12 seat chef's and/or communal table set in front of the 8 foot by 6 foot salumi and cheese display case. "It's like a window at Bloomingdale's. People want to see it," says



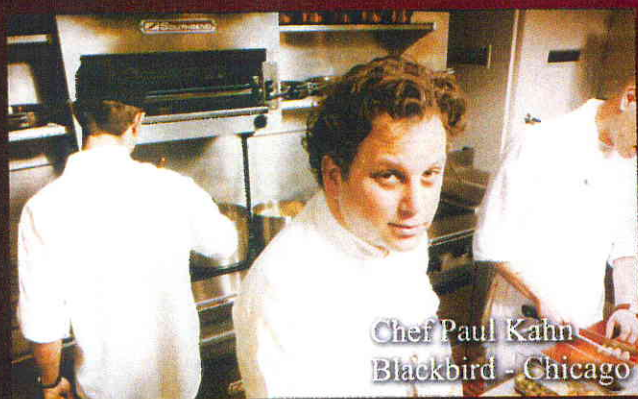
Top: "Crazy Feast" a colorful 30-foot ceiling fresco by Chicago native Todd Murphy floats overhead in the dining room at Cibo Matto. Photo by Wayne Cable. Above: Sous chef Rusty Kook puts a Vita-Mix blender and the Berkel slicer to rigorous use. Photos by Anthony Thalier. Left: Bone-in skate wing piccata with Brussels sprouts (or sugar snap peas in season) is a showstopper on the Cibo Matto menu. Photo by Grant Kessler. Right: Executive chef Todd Stein by the restaurant's impressive wine tower. Photo by Anthony Thalier.



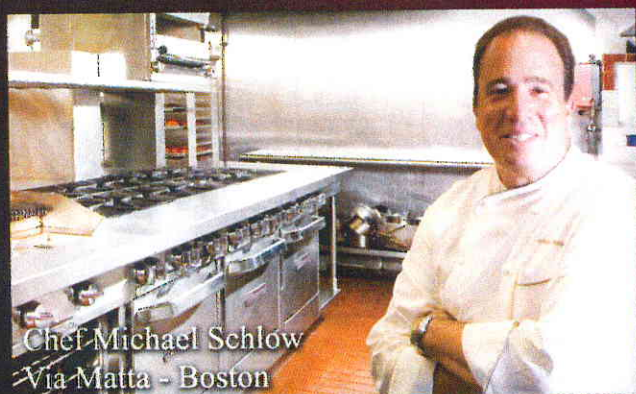


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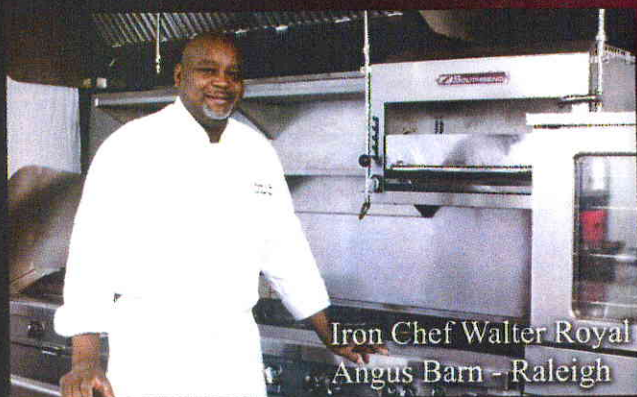
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Guests at the chef's table get a full view of the main line. Photo by Anthony Thaler.

Stein, of the case which now seems to be de rigueur in all new authentic Italian restaurants.

The cooking line is straightforward. Two Southbend ranges flank a flattop. He has a cheese melter but no salamander. "It's a great place to slightly warm and finish things and to hold vegetables and sauces," he explains. There are two deep fryers—one of them is used as a pasta cooker. "I do honest food—not gels and foams and levitating food," he says, though he does admit to an immersion circulator he uses for pork chops. "I really don't like to use sous-vide. I don't like the texture for a lot of things."

Stein has two combi ovens in the prep kitchen that he uses for banquets. And he has three Vita-Mix blenders that he says he can't live without. "They make the smoothest, silkiest purees and soups." There's only one "Ferrari" in the kitchen and that's the bright red handcranked Berkel slicer. "There's no motor so there's no heat to smear and cook the fat," he explains.

With its cream leather banquettes and ambrosia maple tables, the dining room, designed by The Johnson Studio (of Tru fame), provides a subtle backdrop that lets the food shine. A narrow aisle between a double row of banquettes provides an aura of privacy for diners. A colorful 30-foot ceiling fresco entitled "Crazy Feast" by artist Todd Murphy floats overhead. A glass tower with a capacity of 4,000 bottles signals a serious wine program.

As executive chef, Stein oversees all the venues, but State and Lake has its own kitchen and its own chef de cuisine—David Connolly—and a much more casual seasonal American menu. Roof features pizza from a wood-burning oven and a few small plates. A small bar menu is available in the Phoenix Lounge as well. But Cibo Matto is the culinary star of the complex. The pace is frenetic, but it seems to suit Stein's kinetic personality. At 37 he has put all the pieces together and is turning out a menu that has Chicago buzzing.