

= Schwa ( restaurant ) =

Schwa is an acclaimed , upscale restaurant run by chef @-@ owner Michael Carlson in Chicago , United States . It is located in the West Town community area and is considered a leader in the molecular gastronomy style of cooking . Schwa is known for its unconventional approach to business . Simple table settings match the building 's drab exterior and its tiny 26 @-@ seat interior . The restaurant employs no support staff of any kind . Chefs interact directly with customers and are encouraged to act as silly as they wish , as long as they produce top quality food .

Opening in 2005 , Schwa quickly drew local and national attention resulting in a large backlog of reservations . In 2007 , Schwa was chosen to host the opening night of Charlie Trotter 's 20th anniversary celebration . The evening was considered a success , but placed a great deal of stress on Carlson , causing him to close Schwa the following day . After a four @-@ month hiatus Schwa returned , much to the delight of local culinary enthusiasts , or " foodies " .

Schwa 's menu is known for unusual ingredients and innovative food combinations , such as Carlson 's version of pad Thai made with jellyfish tentacles instead of noodles . The quail egg ravioli is considered the restaurant 's signature dish .

Schwa has received positive reviews from both local and national critics . It has received three star to three @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half star ratings from the Chicago Tribune , Chicago magazine , and the Mobil Travel Guide . BlackBook Magazine says Schwa features " some of the best food you will ever consume " , while famed chef Grant Achatz lists it among his personal favorite places to eat . Several critics have stated that below @-@ average service prevents the restaurant from getting a higher rating . Schwa made Citysearch 's Top 10 New Restaurants of 2006 and New York magazine 's Grub Street blog ranked it among the five hardest reservations to score in the country . In 2009 , Schwa made Frommer 's international list of 500 exceptional restaurants .

= = Description = =

Schwa is a tiny , 825 square feet ( 76 @.@ 6 m2 ) restaurant located in the Wicker Park neighborhood of Chicago , Illinois . Seating 26 , it features what chef Michael Carlson describes as a " pared @-@ down " approach to food and has been described as being on the forefront of a new " molecular gastronomy " style of cooking . The menu is short and constantly changing . Writing for the Chicago Sun Times , Allecia Vemillion calls dinner at Schwa " a window into Carlson 's own brain ? laser @-@ focused on food with little time for anything else . " Unlike typical upscale restaurants , Schwa does not have a wine list , a liquor license , or even stemware .

The pared @-@ down approach can also be seen in the way the business is run . Carlson maintains a staff of only four people to run his restaurant ? himself and three other chefs . Schwa has no receptionist , waiters , or other support staff . Schwa 's chefs do every job in the restaurant ranging from taking orders to busing tables . Tables are small , simple , and have none of the usual restaurant amenities ? no flowers , candles , salt , or pepper . The decor is minimalist , and the kitchen is viewable by patrons in the dining room .

Even the building itself is minimalistic . One observer described it as " so understated that [ it ] is easy to miss even when one is looking for it " , while another said " pass by and you might think it 's the home of a batty husband and wife who rarely go outside " . The building has a dirty awning and cheap blinds that give the impression the business is closed for remodeling . Schwa is surrounded by dingy buildings and a tire store featuring plastic palm trees .

In line with its minimalistic tendencies , Schwa serves a maximum of 32 customers a night ( often leaving the dining room half empty ) , with staggered seating so that only one table is ordering at any time . Arriving guests are typically greeted with Carlson 's trademark salutation : " How you cats doing tonight ? " He enjoys casual interaction with his customers , such as calling his dishes " awesome " and " badass " . Instead of the soft background music typical of an upscale restaurant , guests are treated to loud hip @-@ hop or heavy metal music . One customer called Schwa " a nice change from all the corporate restaurants " .

One complaint many customers have with Schwa is that it is exceedingly difficult to get a

reservation . GQ magazine describes a typical customer as having spent weeks trying to get past the always full answering machine that serves as Schwa 's primary reservation system . The restaurant attracts an estimated 60 requests for its 26 seats each day , and is notoriously slow at returning phone calls . One couple got so frustrated with the system that they drove down to the restaurant to make a reservation in person . Upon arrival , they were told they had to call it in . Despite their frustration , the couple kept trying and when they finally got in they remarked , " You know what ? It was worth it . " According to Carlson , most customers ' first comment when they arrive at Schwa is either to complain about how difficult it was to get a reservation or to ask for another one . Schwa will not seat customers without a reservation , even if the restaurant is empty .

The work environment at Schwa is also relaxed . Carlson allows his employees to act goofy and talk however they like , as long as they produce high @-@ quality food . There is no dress code ; one reporter remarked that the staff looked like a bunch of ecoterrorists . Carlson and his all @-@ male staff work long hours ( 16- to 18 @-@ hour workdays ) for below @-@ average pay .

The casual environment at Schwa attracts a diverse clientele , including many local chefs . Carlson says he does not care about etiquette or attire , but will not tolerate rudeness . " If anybody acts as though they expect to be catered to , they 're in the wrong place , " he says . Carlson adds that he is not afraid to tell a customer off if they deserve it . One reporter observed that Schwa couldn 't possibly " do less to preselect customers or filter out undesirable ones . " Schwa does not cater to families , offering no highchairs and few tables capable of seating more than two people .

According to Carlson , Schwa struggles to break even in most weeks . Salaries at Schwa are modest , but food costs make up an astronomical 60 % of the take @-@ in . Carlson has said he would rather cook and run his restaurant the way he wants than make money , and has rejected buyout offers and calls for expansion .

= = History = =

In the fall of 2005 , chef Michael Carlson was approached by an old friend who owned a small restaurant named Lovitt . The friend was moving out of state and offered to sell Carlson his location and equipment for a bargain price . With financial support from his father , Carlson took over Lovitt and renamed the restaurant after the neutral , unstressed vowel schwa ( ? ) , a name he says reflects his " pared @-@ down " approach to food .

Schwa opened September 10 , 2005 , with Carlson promising unstressed food and a laid back attitude . Initially , the restaurant was staffed only by Carlson and his sous chef Nathan Klingbail .

Carlson said his aim with Schwa was to " push the culinary envelope , " while using seasonal , organic ingredients . The Chicago Tribune noted Schwa 's initial menu did just that , featuring " a soft @-@ boiled organic egg coated in brioche , served with potato puree and Illinois sturgeon caviar " . Within weeks , the restaurant had garnered a strong buzz among local foodies . National press attention quickly followed , including Carlson receiving " Best New Chef " honors from Food & Wine magazine , as Schwa earned a reputation for great food and an innovative chef @-@ customer relationship . By early 2007 , Schwa was receiving 100 calls a day and had a three @-@ month @-@ long waiting list for reservations .

One food critic attributed Schwa 's early attention to its unusual combination of " culinary alchemy " and " straightforward Italian cuisine " . Another observer said Schwa was " all about casual sophistication " . A Metromix review called the restaurant " Alinea 's punk @-@ rock little brother . "

On October 5 , 2007 , Carlson hosted a gathering of world @-@ famous chefs at Schwa as part of Charlie Trotter 's 20th anniversary celebration . The evening was a success , but the next morning Carlson abruptly closed Schwa " indefinitely " and left town . He later said that he had burned out from working too hard ? 18 @-@ hour days were not uncommon ? and needed a break and explained that he and his crew had been " talking about closing for weeks , but [ knew they ] just had to do [ the Trotter ] dinner " first . Additionally , Schwa was low on cash and struggling to keep the bills paid .

After Schwa closed , about ten different Chicago restaurant owners offered to help Carlson get back on his feet . Carlson declined their help , but reopened Schwa four months later in mid @-@

February 2008 , thanks in part to a cash infusion from his father . He hired an additional chef , allowing him to focus more of his attention on the dining room . The menu was redone , with only the three most popular dishes ? the quail egg ravioli , the jellyfish pad Thai , and the " pine cone " dessert ? returning . The decor was also tweaked . Customers with old , unfulfilled reservations were given the opportunity to try the new Schwa before new reservations were accepted .

Schwa 's buzz , and customers , quickly returned . By May 2008 , it was routine for the restaurant 's voice mail to reach capacity because of the large number of people trying to get reservations ( and the restaurant 's lack of a receptionist ) . Shortly after its relaunch , one food critic described Schwa as even better than before , saying it was an " Oscar @-@ worthy redemption story . "

Later in 2008 , Michelle Obama ate at the restaurant . Carlson joked that it was good thing that Barack did not join her : " I don 't think the twenty extra Secret Service agents needed would have fit " .

= = Menu = =

Schwa offers a three @-@ course dinner for \$ 55 and an eight- to ten @-@ course " degustation " ( taster ) menu for \$ 110 . The latter option could be described as " chef 's choice " ? on any given night , Carlson prepares courses of his choosing which make up the degustation menu for that evening . Add @-@ ons are also available . Approximately 85 % of customers prefer the nine @-@ course option , as it is officially called .

Portions at Schwa are said to be " small and intentionally artful . " Dishes available change frequently , as Carlson becomes bored and moves on to something new . " If he 's bored with something , no matter how many people love it and demand it , he 's done with it , " notes his girlfriend .

The menu at Schwa is hard to classify . Schwa chef Jonathan Ory describes it as " modern American " , but sous @-@ chef Gaetano Nardulli disagrees : " I don 't think it 's contemporary American , not at all . " Food critic Alan Richman describes it as " one of a kind ... earnest , innocent , irresistible , and imaginative " . The menu is famous for using sophisticated ingredients to create , as one critic put it , " poetic courses " . Surprising ingredients such as jellyfish , roe , tongue , and offal are found in a large number of dishes , as are unusual combinations such as oysters and oatmeal . No portion of the meal is spared from experimentation ; tomato sorbet finds its way into the salad , while the consommé soup features melon pieces .

Despite the large number of unusual dishes , Schwa is perhaps best known for Carlson 's simple , modern interpretation of Italian classics . Among the most popular dishes is the quail egg ravioli , which has been on the menu since day one . Considered the restaurant 's signature dish , it consists of a single ravioli stuffed with quail egg yolk and laced with truffle butter . Schwa is known for emphasizing locally grown produce , and many dishes feature organic ingredients . However , The Local Beet ( a website that promotes eating locally grown food ) questioned Schwa 's commitment to the principle , noting the use of out @-@ of @-@ season strawberries and peas . Most dishes are served with purées .

Also among Schwa 's best known dishes is the sweetbread dessert . Combining caramelized sweetbreads with vanilla bean ? parsnip custard , the dish has been described as " unequivocally adored " . Other notable dishes include pad Thai made with jellyfish instead of noodles , antelope meat dusted with curry powder and coated with white chocolate pudding , " pine cones " ( sea urchin ice cream served in pine @-@ flavored cones ) , and something Carlson calls " onion glue " . Innovative drinks , such as beet juice flavored with bacon , are also available . However , Schwa does not serve bread or wine . Customers wishing wine are required to bring their own , although Carlson will offer suggestions of what to bring upon request .

= = Reputation = =

Schwa has received positive reviews from the Chicago Sun @-@ Times , Chicago Tribune , Frommer 's , and GQ , among others . In 2006 , Phil Vettel of the Chicago Tribune described the

food as four @-@ star quality , while giving the restaurant an overall rating of three stars ( out of four ) because of below @-@ average service . Vettel added that nearly every item on the menu is " wonderful " . Vettel returned to Schwa after the 2008 relaunch and concluded " Schwa is at least as good as it was in its early days , and probably better " . He credited Carlson 's increased focus on the dining room for the improvement , and maintained Schwa 's three @-@ star rating .

In the Daily Herald , Jennifer Olvera wrote that Schwa 's original menu was " a culinary affair " and that seafood @-@ lovers would leave Schwa " gushing " . She described dishes as " refreshing and interesting , " " visually stunning " , and " [ begging ] to be savored " , but was not completely satisfied . She found the portions to be small and pricey , and the service to be rather poor , bordering on rude . " They need to get past the pomp and focus on the issue at hand " , she said . A Chicago magazine reviewer remarked that the cooking was " superbly inventive " and that Carlson wowed him with " tasty stunts ... [ that ] knock your socks off " .

Writing about Schwa 's post @-@ relaunch menu , Metromix dining producer Chris LaMorte writes , " It 's [ even ] better now ? dishes are more focused , yet still inventive . Presentation is better . Quality is more consistent . Chef @-@ servers are ( slightly ) more approachable . " LaMorte did find some fault during his visit , describing the china as " monotonous " and saying the chef @-@ waiters " always dash off too quickly . " Martha Bayne of Chicago Reader , also writing about the post @-@ relaunch menu , agreed saying , " the food is better than ever . " Bayne called the food " legendary " , but did say the jellyfish pad Thai did not " quite live up to their promise " . Her favorite dish of the night was the sweetbreads dessert , which she described as " salty , savory , sweet , and deliriously complex , it shoots for the moon and succeeds by confounding every expectation . "

Chicago magazine gives Schwa three @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half stars ( out of four ) , saying " count on OK service but brilliant food " and an experience that " defies the norm . " Alan Richman of GQ writes " I did not taste one bite of food ... that was prepared imprecisely ... plates are filled with flavors out to the edge of the rim , " while BlackBook Magazine claims Schwa features " some of the best food you will ever consume . "

Schwa is known as a " chef 's restaurant " where local chefs eat on their days off . Paul Kahan remarks , " I think it 's so cool that the chefs serve the food " , while Carrie Nahabedian emphatically declares " Everyone loves Schwa . " Grant Achatz lists Schwa as one of his three favorite places to eat in Chicago .

Locally grown product enthusiast Rob Gardner described Schwa as " a fun restaurant " and a " tremendous value " despite the price . He was , however , disappointed in the restaurant 's use of out @-@ of @-@ season produce . " What you will not get ... [ is ] enough local food " , he wrote , adding that the out @-@ of @-@ season " pea dish was the worst of the offerings . "

In 2009 , Schwa made Frommer 's international list of 500 exceptional restaurants . Frommer 's author Holly Hughes described Schwa 's dishes as " miniature works of art " and Carlson 's cooking as " innovative " . She continued , " Carlson 's food just plain tastes good " and " sometimes rises to the level of sheer poetry . " That same year , Mobil Travel Guide awarded Schwa three stars ( out of five ) calling the menu " remarkably innovative " and " knockout " good . The Mobil reviewer did , however , conclude that the food was " a little pricey " .

Schwa made Citysearch 's " Top 10 New Restaurants " of 2006 , placing fourth nationwide , and was named best new restaurant by Newcity . Also in 2006 , Schwa was listed as one of Chicago 's hottest eating spots by Nation 's Restaurant News . In January 2010 , Schwa 's caramelized sweetbreads made Alan Richman 's top five desserts of the year .

In 2008 , The New York Times profiled Schwa as one of a handful of restaurants employing an innovative chef @-@ client relationship . The next year , New York magazine 's Grub Street blog ranked Schwa among the country 's five toughest reservations .