

DiRōNA RESTAURANT SPOTLIGHT

Chicago Chop House: For the Carnivore in All of Us

By Vickie Mabry, Managing Editor,
Distinguished Dining

The first clue came in the name itself. Pulling back the heavy glass-laden double doors of the 100-year-old row house on Chicago's West Ontario Street, we were met with the warm clatter of conversation accented with laughter and the ting of forks and knives hard at work. That was our second clue. Co-owner Susan Gayford greets us with a hardy handshake taking us up two flights of stairs past wooden walls and unpretentious patrons relishing their meals and each other. That would have been the third clue. Once seated, I watched my non-carnivorous friend scan the menu, glance furtively at neighboring tables before proclaiming, hands on hip, "This is a steakhouse." "Well, yes," I confirmed her suspicions. "But look," I reassured her, "You can get seafood or chicken. Or maybe you'd like a baked potato with a couple of sides."

Once drinks were served and pleasantries out of the way, I probe, in my most obnoxious journalistic manner, about the menu and its offerings. To almost every silly question, Gayford smiles patiently and begins each response with the same simple statement. "It's a steakhouse." But it wasn't until I came face to face with a porterhouse the size of Fred Flintstone's open-air coupe, that my friend and I fully appreciated the



unmistakable fact that the Chicago Chop House is, indeed, by every definition, a STEAKHOUSE. It does not, nor will it ever, pretend to be otherwise. Tonight, we eat meat!

It's just that sentiment I imagine inspired Chicago restaurateur Henry Norton to sell his home and open a steakhouse. The city was brimming with seafood restaurants when the Chicago Chop House opened its doors in November 1986. Its menu, developed by Executive Chef and Co-Owner Bill Farrahi, remains basically the same today. The hard-core, but fish- and poultry-friendly steakhouse cuisine offers, in true DiRōNA style, only the best cuts from the finest meat purveyors in a variety of portions and presentation. The meat mainstays on which the restaurant built its reputation range in size from a 10 oz. filet mignon to a 64 oz. porterhouse. In between, there's prime rib and New York strip (each available in 16 oz and 24 oz. cuts); a choice of spring lamb chops or roast rack of lamb; or roast loin of pork chops.

Early on Norton knew the locals would find his steakhouse haven, so Norton focused advertising efforts on out-of-towners — the business and convention trade. The formula must have worked because then and now business is booming at the Chicago Chop House. Norton passed away in 1994, but the restaurant is thriving under the watchful eyes of the people that helped Norton make it successful — partners Bill Farrahi, Susan Gayford and John Pontarelli. Norton's commitment to exceptional dining lives on, judging

from the many awards the Chicago Chop House has to its credit including its selection as a 2004 DiRōNA Award Recipient; Wine Spectator Award of Excellence (1994-2002); Tom Horan's America's Top Ten Club and more than a dozen others.

Lest you think the Chicago Chop House is resting on its bovine laurels, the wine selection will blow your White Sox off! Gayford takes personal pride in the award-winning wine list, which contains 525 wines from around the world ranging in price from \$23 for a bottle of Oregon's Lorane Valley 1999 Pinot Noir to \$2295 for a bottle of French Bordeaux Chateau Mouton-Rothschild 1982. (I wouldn't swish and spit that one out.) Most Chop House wines cost between \$35 and \$80 with 30 wines available by the glass.

Wondering about my vegetarian friend? To be polite, she ordered "surf & turf" going with a 10 oz. filet mignon and a broiled lobster tail. She muttered something like "when in Rome" before taking the first bite of red meat to pass her lips since Gore stopped counting dimpled chads. I can still hear the "Oh-how-I've-missed-you" moan and the clickety-clack sound her eyes made as they rolled to the back of her head. And me? Well, apparently a 48 oz. Porterhouse dripping in its own succulent juice isn't so big after all (she said as she rubbed her belly contentedly).

I came to the Chicago Chop House wondering why we refer to restaurants that specialize in steaks as steakhouses. (I mean we don't say sushi shacks or pizza homes.) Gayford says a true steakhouse has a certain comfortable feel, nothing stark, lots of wood and good food. It gets back to why Norton was so hell bent on opening the Chicago Chop House nearly 20 years ago. He wanted an oasis in a bustling city, where residents and visitors are greeted, nourished and satisfied. He wanted a steakhouse, simple as that. Good job Henry. I'm a believer. And I know of at least one former vegetarian who rediscovered her carnivorous side at the Chicago Chop House.

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Chicago Chop House Owners (L-R):
Pontarelli, Gayford and Farrahi.

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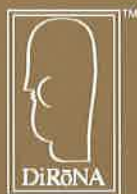
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