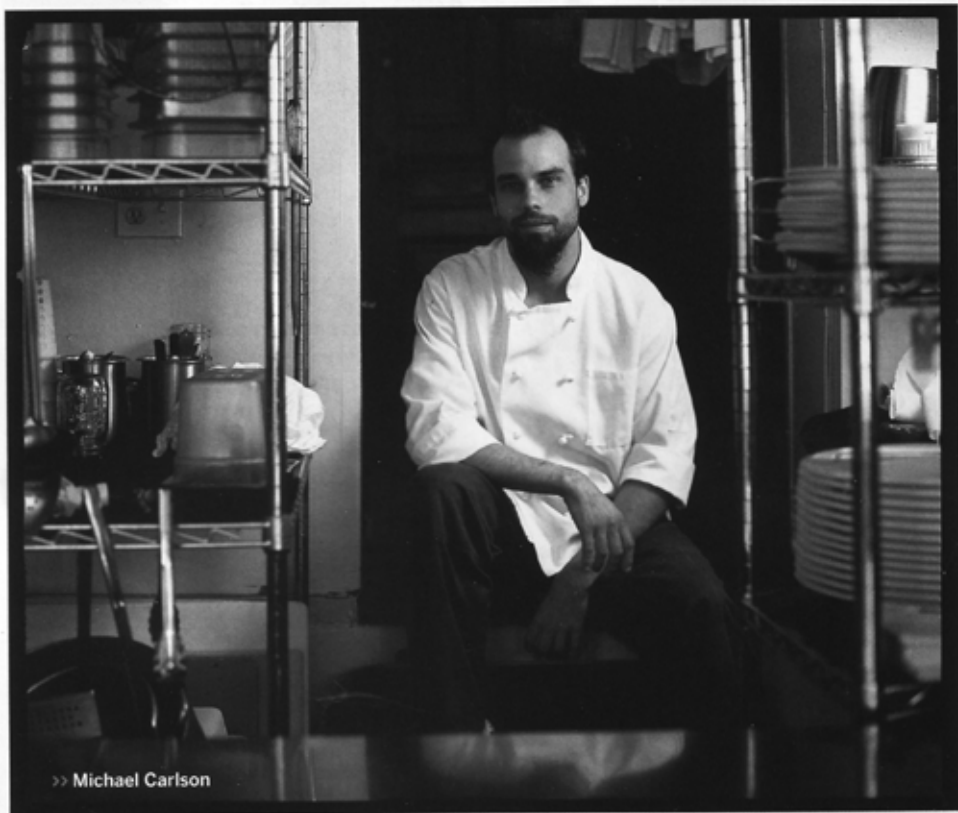


> The Innovators

Four groundbreakers who are embracing the future



>> Michael Carlson

MICHAEL CARLSON

Schwa 1466 N. Ashland Ave.:
773-252-1466

In his words

AGE 32 HOMETOWN Lombard, Illinois **HOW LONG HE LASTED IN COOKING SCHOOL** one semester **WHY HE LEFT** "I decided to go to Europe. I spent almost two years in Italy working." **EARLY MENTOR** Paul Bartolotta at Spiaggia **WHERE HE WAS TEN YEARS AGO** "I don't even know." **WHERE HE'LL BE IN TEN YEARS** "I think I will always be here. I love Chicago." **FIRST GOURMET MEAL** "I was, like, 12 years old. We went up to Quebec and stayed at this enormous hotel that had some old-school French chef. Duck with blueberries. I remember that." **LAST MEAL ON EARTH** foie gras **COOK-**

BOOK HE LOVES Thomas Keller's *The French Laundry Cookbook* **IF HE COULD COOK WITH ANY CHEF** "Jacques Pépin is the coolest cat in the world. I would like to spend a little time with him." **RESTAURANT HE CAN'T WAIT TO EAT AT** El Bulli: "I think that's every young chef's goal." **CULINARY PHILOSOPHY** "Just make everything taste good." **WORKING HAZARD** "Every once in a while you lop a quarter inch off your finger." **IN HIS FRIDGE AT HOME** "Maybe a couple of condiments, if even that. If they're in there, I don't know if I would want to eat them."

In our words

It's been a great year for Michael Carlson. He got named as one of *Food &*

Wine's best new chefs for doing exactly what he wants: working in a tiny BYO restaurant with a tiny staff that includes two buddies, his sous-chef/partner Nathan Klingbail and cook Blake Bengsch. His Italian- and Achatz-influenced contemporary food incorporates powders, foams, congealing agents, and other high-tech chemistry; and he'll do sous vide slow-cooking on about anything he can stuff into a vacuum-sealed pouch. If you want to taste astonishing flavors, get over to Schwa, where Carlson has been known to rock diners' souls with the likes of pea soup with morels, lemon, and lavender, and beef rib eye three ways—braised, pickled, and raw. —D. R. W.

>> Schwa's brain
trust: chef Michael
Carlson (left) and
sous-chef Nathan
Klingbail



Q&A

BEST TURKEY BURGER **Luxbar**

(18 E. Bellevue Place; 312-642-3400) uses freshly ground roasted turkey and no filler in these babies

This past September, **MICHAEL CARLSON**, a 31-year-old west suburban native who skipped out of culinary school, quietly opened **SCHWA** (1466 N. Ashland Ave.; 773-252-1466). From the tiny kitchen of his 28-seat BYO storefront, Carlson turns out astonishingly haute dishes. We love his food—and his genuine sense of surprise at Schwa's success.

HOW DID YOU BECOME INTERESTED IN COOKING?

I don't know. My mom says I watched Julia Child as a little kid. I don't remember it. I got a job during college in a little bar and decided to step up to the next level. Just kept doing that.

DID YOUR JOURNEY INCLUDE ANY FORMAL TRAINING?

Not really. I went to **CHIC** [the Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago] for a semester and opted to take my money and go to Europe instead. I went three separate times for anywhere from seven months to over a year. Spent most of my time in Italy in a place called San Domenico in Imola. Gets two stars in Michelin—at least it did when I was there. Traveled all over Italy working in small kitchens.

BUT YOUR STYLE ISN'T REALLY ITALIAN. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE IT?

You have to look at my two main influences. I worked under Grant Achatz at Trio for a year and a half and then my most recent stint in Europe

was at The Fat Duck just outside London, where I staged ["stazhed"] for five weeks. So I'm taking those influences and thinking about what I saw, but I am also very rooted in classic Italian food. My sous-chef, Nathan Klingbail, has a lot to do with the food, too. He's a very talented chef.

YOU'VE BEEN COMPARED TO ACHATZ. DOES THAT BUG YOU?

No. I love him. No one really compares us. I like where our food is going. It's simpler. Not as refined or complicated as Grant's. They [Alinea and Schwa] are two totally different experiences.

WHAT IS THE BEST DISH YOU'VE COME UP WITH?

I'm always happy with the prosciutto consommé, but my favorite dish is quail egg-filled ravioli, which is probably our simplest dish.

ARE YOU SHOCKED BY YOUR SUCCESS?

Oh, yeah. Just doing it to do our thing. Guess we're making other people happy, too. Nathan and I really love coming to work.

—Penny Pollack

BEST CHEF IN A BOWLING ALLEY **Eric Possa**

at Lucky Strike Lanes (AMC River East 21, 322 E. Illinois St.; 312-245-8331) has a résumé that includes Avenues and Les Nomades