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## Girl & the Goat

RATING: ★★★

809 W. Randolph St.,  
312.492.6262

What the stars mean:

★ = fair, some noteworthy qualities;  
★★ = good, above average;  
★★★ = very good, well above norm;  
★★★★ = excellent, among the area's best;  
★★★★★ = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service.

**WHAT TO WEAR:** *A no-fuss T-shirt and jeans.*

**WHAT TO ORDER:** *Mezzelune, beef tongue, frozen corn nougat.*

**WHEN TO GO:** *Whenever you can get a reservation. The spot garnered 3,000 table requests the first day the phone lines opened and is booked about three months out. Walk-ins are welcome, but be prepared for long waits.*

**WHAT TO KNOW:** *The charred walls were hand-torched and resin-lacquered by 555 International, a local firm behind part of the Dallas Cowboys' stadium and several other high-profile projects.*

**WHO GOES:** *Everyone! Most tables are taken up by rabid foodies and scenesters.*

**WHAT IT COSTS:** *Shared plates \$6-\$18; desserts \$8.*

# She's Got Your Goat

Two years post-*Top Chef*, Stephanie Izard's still more popular than a high school prom queen

| By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier |

Except for a photo of a woman making out with a goat, an online image search for the phrase "Girl and the Goat" comes up surprisingly tame. It turns out that Stephanie Izard—*Top Chef* season 4 winner, former Scylla chef/owner and general Chicago sweetheart—has conquered Google, too. Her new restaurant, Girl & the Goat, has only been open in the West Loop since July, yet 33 of the 36 results on the first search page are already glamour shots of Izard in the open kitchen, snapshots of her neatly divided fish/meat/veggies menu, poorly taken smartphone photos of crisp soft-shell crab in a sweet corn casserole.

Taking the risk of unearthing goat porn is a necessary professional hazard when you're curious about a restaurant with a loose culinary theme (rustic new American, Mediterranean and Asian influences all play a part; for lack of a better phrase, Izard jokingly has called her style "whole-mouth happy"), where the menu changes faster than the Blackhawks' Stanley Cup-

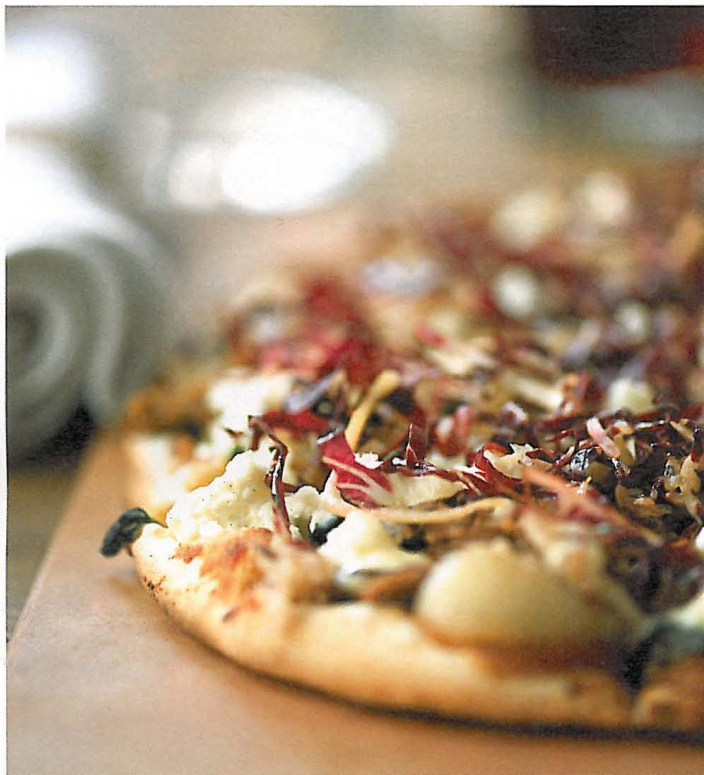
winning team roster did during hockey season. But if you're looking for shocking, worry not, because the Goat is the kind of place where you'll encounter plenty of things you've never seen before.

For one, there's the half-million-dollar Porsche Carrera GT parked out front. Porsche produced this bad boy for just two years and sold only 600 in the United States. You're generally more likely to see a Cubs World Series win before a car like this. Yet, the crowd here is surprisingly casual. Sure, there are a few tufted Marc Jacobs bags draped over the back of the metal x-frame chairs. But Girl & the Goat has way more jeans-wearing foodiacs and industry folks (Naha's Carrie Nahabedian is two tables away) than Gold Coasters. Even on a Wednesday night, the place is buzzing like Ed Sullivan's studio the night the Beatles played.

If the chill crowd doesn't do it, the dark lair of a dining room puts me at ease. Flames lick at the back of a huge wood-fired oven while I eat up CONTINUED...

**TOP STEPH** Clockwise from top left: Stephanie Izard; rabbit rillette with crisp rice crêpe, ginger giardiniera and sweet garlic; antique fireplace covers work as liquor shelves. Below: Black olive mezzelune with leeks, summer squash, peaches and harissa.





Though she's the main attraction, Izard is not out glad-handing. In fact, the only thing I really see of her all night is her tight ponytail. She understands that fame doesn't mean a thing if she isn't paying attention to every plate.



From top: Smoked goat pizza with apple soffritto, black kale, ricotta and cipollini; diners chow under the industrial-style ceiling.

...CONTINUED the inky black, charred wood walls in the middle of the room. I imagine this is what it would feel like to dine in a whiskey barrel, which is nirvana for a bourbon aficionado like me. (Don't miss the Maker's Mark 46 Old Fashioned, with its house-spiced cherry and syrupy finish.) On another wall, antique fireplace covers are repurposed to hold liquor bottles. Their intricate metalwork makes the Goat bar look like it was stolen from Spain's Alhambra palace.

Despite the baroque barchitecture, the food isn't fussy. Izard's dishes are simple, well-edited and punchy. Our waitress seems punchy too—though not in quite the same way. She rattles through the specials with the breathless delivery of a 12-year-old who has just spotted Justin Bieber, and claims half of the menu is “to die for,” including a rustic bread served with coffee bean butter and blueberry oil. The bitterness of the coffee plays well against the nuttiness of the loaf and the sweetness of the oil, but in all fairness, I wouldn't die for it, maybe just contract a small cold. Along the theme of shocking things at the Goat: You have to pay for the bread here

(\$4). However, if that means moist and crumbly carrot bread with golden raisins rather than same-old Red Hen sourdough, I support the toll.

Another surprise: Despite Izard's verve for pork, her veggies are killer. Mezzelune—delicate ravioli stuffed with black olive and tossed with velvety summer squash, zingy sweet cherry, and fiery harissa—are as good as anything served at vegetarian palace Green Zebra, owned by Izard's mentor Shawn McClain.

Of course, my friends and I didn't come here for fiber. We want pubby bacchanal. In seconds, we gobble two orders of fried oysters that cradle caper-studded egg salad. Half of them are perfect, but some, stinky on capers, would do well with a touch more salt.

What I love most about Izard is that when it comes to balancing dishes, she drops more acid than a Deadhead. The fatty richness of the fried soft-shell crab with spicy aioli is enhanced by a light-lifting drizzle of lime. Braised beef tongue, often gelatinous and mushy, eats like a short rib. In an upscale riff on chilaquiles, its tender shards are mixed with wafer-thin masa crisps and brightened by a dose of beef vinaigrette and salsa verde. Izard once told me her favorite stop after a night of drinking was for a carnitas tostada at Arturo's, a taqueria in Bucktown. I wonder why she didn't just whip up this for herself instead.

A rare failure to deploy acid is what sinks Izard's only real middling dish, the provocatively named escargot and goatballs (a mushy mess of meatballs and spongy escargot). But when dessert hits, there is redemption. Perhaps the best acidic balance all night is in the pond of plum-apricot gastrique waiting for me as I dig through a cloud of frozen corn nougat studded with smoky bacon bits. Whether it's putting olive oil in her gelato or goat cheese in her Bavarian crème, Izard has a knack for pairing sweet and savory in desserts.

Maybe the most surprising thing about the Goat is Izard herself. Though she's the main attraction, the *Top Chef* star is not out glad-handing. In fact the only thing I really see of her all night is her tight ponytail. She understands that fame doesn't mean a thing if she isn't paying attention to every plate that crosses her pass.

Owners Rob Katz and Kevin Boehm handle the schmooze angle. The two work the room hard. They also work *in* the room. Boehm, with his handsome darkness and rugged stubble, always reminds me a touch of post-Wham George Michael. He runs plates to a table, while Katz brings extra chairs and pours water for a group. Instead of idly counting the ducats from their burgeoning empire (Perennial, Landmark, Boka and an upcoming oyster bar in the former Tizi Melloul space), they're sweating it out alongside Izard. Such devotion isn't quite as shocking as a girl trading spit with a goat, but it sure is way more refreshing. ■