

Alinea

By Jess Thomson

My first experience with molecular gastronomy was like so many of life's great initiations: by definition, the first time can only happen once. Even before I got to Chicago, my anticipation was matched by a twin disappointment, a lurking acknowledgement that once I had experienced Alinea once, I could never eat like a virgin again.

The difficult thing about Alinea is that for someone like me, someone who's relatively used to judging food, it's a little weird to be dropped into a situation where I can no longer tell whether something looks or smells or tastes right because I have nothing to compare it to. How am I supposed to know if a horseradish-infused cocoa butter ping pong ball has been well executed? When was the last time I or anyone else had a powdered Picholine olive?

Let me say that on one hand, it was thrilling, because it stripped me of all previous assumptions about food; Alinea served foods which in another situation I might not have identified as consumable. I loved the way each course blasted away my expectations and presented intriguing, playful, and architecturally interesting food art. This is not food meant to be cooked at home; Alinea defines (somewhat too energetically, maybe) why people like me eat out.

On the other hand, I almost felt like they were cheating. How can I compare the food at Alinea to any other restaurant, unless I've been to Moto or El Bulli? And where's the real food? It's like asking a kid about his trip to Disneyland when he's only been to the state fair. Of course it was cool.

Alinea was everything I'd hoped it would be: it was an expansive, expensive experience in avant-garde food theater. To say the food was innovative, creative, and surprising would be a massive understatement. But it was also a few things I hadn't expected: the food was very personal (because each one of us interpreted the food in a different way), sometimes sexy (if not downright sexual), and in a few cases, disgusting.

I'd heard walking into Alinea is like entering a private club; still, I felt a little thrill opening the door on the unmarked building. The steely grey entrance corridor reminded me of the Antarctic ice cap – cool, silvery light bounced off the wall's vertical cuts in a way that might have made me feel claustrophobic, had I not read that an almost-invisible door to our left would swish open, admitting us like visitors to some sort of culinary Enterprise.

The experience, in present tense

Grace, Stephanie, Kathy and I are hustled to a quiet upstairs corner and tucked into a deep, plush booth. We sort of stare at each other at first. There are clearly no menus involved so we sit, wondering why they've chosen slick, dark wooden tables that put

almost three full feet of distance between the people sitting face to face and why one of the suited servers is obsessively arranging and rearranging four eight-inch rosemary sprigs in stainless steel holders in the center of our table.

The entire waitstaff is beautiful, almost disturbingly spry, and impeccably well-groomed. They are not waiters, they are model-waiters, and they seem to know it. Model-waiter #1 arrives with a wine list, but as we began to ask normal restaurant questions, his answers make it clear that we are not at a normal restaurant. We've already committed to a \$135 twelve-course "tasting menu," the smaller of their two dining options, which includes unlimited pours of Chicago's dubious tap water. But we're all a bit hesitant to spend much more. We're interested in wine, but none of us recognizes anything on the by-the-glass menu.

Model-waiter #1: Can I interest you in a wine-pairing tour?

Kathy: Can you tell us how much it is?

MW #1: That depends.

We're all wondering how difficult a question this is.

Kathy: On what?

MW #1: On what wines you order.

Kathy, looking like she's pulling teeth: I'd like something simple.

MW #1 looks pained: The cost of a wine pairing is equivalent to roughly three-quarters of the cost of your food tour.

Kathy is baffled that this man insists on making her do algebra to earn her wine.

Kathy: I'm not too good at math. How much is that?

MW #1: \$95, give or take.

Kathy: Give or take *what*?

It goes on like this until Kathy just asks for a glass of white wine. MW #1 send the sommelier over, who turns out to be a model also. He recommends a glass of white burgundy.

Kathy: Can you tell us how much of an investment that would be?

Model-sommelier scurries off, and returns with an odd reply: \$5 per ounce, ma'am.

We eventually get over the feeling that we've secured a deal in some illicit substance and explain our preferences well enough that he outfits each of us with a glass of something unpronounceable that knocks our respective socks off. (I had a champagne cocktail made with Pineau de Charentes and some good French champagne.) Model-sommelier smiles and tells us about Chicago.

We sit. It occurs to me that this might be the first time I eat at a restaurant without having the slightest idea of what's coming – I didn't bother to look at the menu closely ahead of time, because the sample menus online read like an SNL skit. "CHANTERELLE: carrot, curry, ham."

Then it starts, an exciting, then inspiring, then completely overwhelming fifteen-course tour of food as I know it, presented as I'd never imagined it. Each course baffles me. I try to take notes, but some of the courses are so complicated that I have page after page of words that have been started but never finished. It is an awesome assault.

Each course comes with a verbal instruction manual. The model-waiters detail not only what's in each dish, but whether to play with it first, how to eat it (*"Don't use your hands, ladies, just dive in and suck this one up!"*), and where to put the utensils afterward.

Here they are, twelve courses that somehow morphed into fifteen, with my own personal recommendations for course titles, should Alinea need help with future menu descriptions:

ONE: Hot Liquid Tuna Tater Tot

In what we will soon recognize as the tag-team model-waiter swoop, a mini white ceramic pedestal lands in front of each of us simultaneously. It's a croquette, a tiny panko-crust deep-fried bomb with sorrel, fried capers, candied endive, and caviar on the top. We pick the pedestals up and knock the croquettes back like shots, as instructed. As the crust breaks, hot sour cream soup oozes onto my tongue. It tastes like a liquid tuna fish sandwich, and the outside is crunchy like a tater tot. I love it.

TWO: Octopus Salad

First, we get a shallow round-bottomed glass ramekin; it looks like something I once put a bacteria specimen on in 10th grade chemistry. Next, a model-waiter hands each of us a round-bottomed bowl that we must hold, because it would tip over if we put it on the table. The edge of the bowl is notched, so a fork piled with an exquisitely detailed composed salad can rest half-inside the bowl. Smoky grilled octopus and scallions, avocado, and a microscopic (and undoubtedly tweezer-placed) arrangement of papaya, wasabi shoots, and pink shiso blossoms perches precariously over a warm, shallow bath of mint-infused toasted soy milk, which we obediently drink after nibbling the minisalat off the fork in one small bite. It's herby, smoky, and minty all at once, and the octopus is almost too tender. Perhaps it was octopus, pureed and regelled using agar to resemble octopus? We place the forks on the little ramekins, as instructed.

I've eaten next to nothing, and my brain is already tired. The conversation floats from May Ray to the waiters to our experience at Hog Doug's earlier that day to the other conference attendees at nearby tables.

THREE: Chanterelle-Carrot Surprise

Alinea becomes a study in obsessive-compulsive waiter behavior. Model-waiter #2 brings four square plates. Each has been fitted with linen-covered pillows. He begins to arrange them in the center of the table, nudging and pushing and tapping them around so that they're absolutely perfectly aligned. I wonder for a moment if MW #2 had experience showing jewelry, but I bite my tongue when he starts fiddling with our water glasses and I realize he's just setting the table. We'll be getting both forks and spoons on the little pillows for each course, so we can always choose the implement we prefer. He tells us it's "against the law" to put silverware on the table at Alinea, both because the table is scratchable and because they'd prefer we don't put table germs in our mouths. I obnoxiously wonder out loud why a restaurant would actually install tables not meant to touch silverware. He shoots me a dark look.

Salty, herby rolls come with polished little butter quenelles of goat's milk and cow's milk butter; both spreads have the consistency of regular butter but must somehow be molecularly morphed, because they melt more quickly than usual in my mouth and the deep dairy flavor almost makes me dizzy. Or is it the champagne?

The next course comes in a wide, flat bowl whose rim extends almost all the way back down to the table. In its center sits what appears to be a verrine of six or seven shades of orange and brown, piled into a shot glass with apparent insouciance, like the chef was packing up his miniature culinary leftovers. MW #1 lists the layers: pureed chanterelle mushrooms, sautéed chanterelles, an egg yolk poached perfectly at 165 degrees just to its gelling point, sweet, sticky apricot leather molded around Madras curry, a ball of Dijon-sautéed spinach, a wisp of dried prosciutto. . . The whole thing is topped with a flurry of carrot foam. There's so much to write that I'm flying from one detail to the next, trying to zoom out and capture the whole dish in a single frame in my mind, figure out why fruit leather and prosciutto and carrot will work . . . then the model-waiters swoop down and remove the shot glasses, which I now realize are bottomless glass cylinders, and the food collapses together in the bottom of my bowl. I am a little girl and it's Christmas; I want to clap happily because I appreciate the surprise, but it would be so loud and awkward.

It works: silky mushroom puree, chewy apricot, earthy curry, and rich, bold egg yolk collide peacefully in my mouth. We all groan with pleasure.

I want so badly to ask if they do take out, just to see what the model-waiters would say.

FOUR: Passover Ping-Pong Balls

Now it gets weird. Tall, bullet-shaped shot glasses appear to be holding some greenish liquid and a ping pong ball. I realize I have an automatic food identification mechanism that's no longer working.

Model-sommelier looks at us earnestly and gives us instructions that are difficult not to construe as sexual: "Ladies, these balls are bigger than they appear. We suggest you swallow the whole thing in one bite: take all the liquid at once, including the ball, and close your mouth around the ball so that the liquid inside the ball doesn't spurt out everywhere." We avoid each other's eyes and giggle like 14-year-olds. Is he doing this on purpose?

I do as I'm told, and yes, the balls are much bigger than they look. Celery juice goes down first, and right as the ball – really a cocoa-butter shell infused with horseradish – hits my tongue, it shatters, releasing a cold, sweet granny smith apple juice that chases the celery juice, leaving the cocoa butter shell in my mouth, unwanted as an empty candy wrapper and not that different in texture. It's like I'm chewing an apple- and horseradish-flavored pair of those red wax lips. I force myself to swallow, but I can't get rid of the aftertaste fast enough. We all make horrible faces.

"I think Passover just erupted in my mouth," says Kathy.

By our count, we are now a third of the way there, and I'm starting to get nervous. What if it gets worse than this? I'm silently thankful that I'm not meeting anyone for the first time tonight.

FIVE: Monkfish (I think they got this title right)

This course scares me at first, but it tastes right, and looks more like real food than what we've seen so far.

It's monkfish, the fish that poses in texture and flavor as lobster. It's in a wacky cylindrical bowl with an hourglass outline and an oval-shaped opening. Banana and lime puddings are tucked into the cavernous interior, along with monkfish prepared a few different ways: some is poached, some has been ground and fried to a crisp, and yet more has been pureed and formed into a perfectly mousseline quenelle that quivers when I touch it with my (exceptionally clean) spoon. Model-waiter #3, the one who I think might not like us anymore, identifies the brown leaf balanced on the top as "onion paper." He senses us trying to wrap our intellects around what monkfish, lime, and banana might taste like together, and assures us that even though the flavors may seem disparate, they will work if we eat them together, rather than one at a time. We try. They do.

A very pregnant woman walks by and I wonder what her fetus thinks of all this.

The rosemary is beginning to wilt on the table, and I guess that its lifespan is somehow connected with the length of our meal.

SIX: Hush-hush

Model-waiter #3 sticks a long, thin paddle into our conversation. On it, he balances four small cinnamon meringues, which are filled with an ice cold duck product of dubious legality in Chicago. We wonder why Alinea can serve this when Hot Doug's got nailed for it, and the model-sommelier tells us it's not actually a course, but a *gift*. They are not *selling* foie gras, and in Chicago, there is no law against giving it away.

"This is really kind of icky," says Grace. She's right. I think about leaving it after the first tiny bite, but there are no plates and by now I'm afraid to set anything on the table. I force it down.

SEVEN: Underwear Drawer Duck

There is more rearranging, water *here*, plates *there*. One person has both still and sparkling water ("*would you like hard bubbles or soft bubbles?*"), and the waiters seem to disagree about which goes where, so she's constantly guessing which is which and wondering how many minutes it will be before another person touches her water glass(es).

I sense the whole table recoiling when the waiters begin marching over again; it's been almost three hours and we're beginning to fade. But wait, are they reading our minds? They come bearing pillows – big, square pillows covered in crisp white linen – and I'm momentarily convinced it's naptime. As they get closer, an unmistakable lavender aroma envelopes our space, and I think how wonderful it would be if one of these pillows arrived in the middle of a transpacific airline flight, instead of on my dinner table where I think my plate should be.

But there will be no nap. Duck-laden plates land on each pillow, and we're instructed to eat, quick. Each time I cut into the duck (tender breast cured in juniper and spiraled so it looks like a shrimp on the plate; moist, shreddy confited duck legs; searingly salty, crisp duck skin), invisible puffs of lavender air escape from the pillow and season the duck through my sense of smell. I'm delighted – I don't like the tiny turnips braised in red wine, and the stabilized yogurt water seems sort of superfluous next to the rich duck flavor, but this combination of textures and senses makes me want to buy a candle in every food flavor.

Some disagree. "I found the lavender really offensive," says Kathy. "It was like eating my underwear drawer."

EIGHT: Braised Beef with Guinness Pasta

Stephanie begins asking the waiters to repeat the ingredients of each dish slowly, as if the evening is actually making us all deaf. I'm thankful.

Next we each get a gigantic square plate—this is why the tables are so big!—which carries a dish one of the model-waiters describes as “beef and beer.” It looks like multiple chunks of brightly-hued baby food sealed under a big transparent sheet of ravioli, and it turns out to be braised Kobe short ribs, soft and tender, with broccoli puree and peanut pudding, sealed under a layer of Guinness beer that magical food science has transformed into a sticky but solid film. I can’t help but think of organs when I see how the film is stretched over the different scoops of food, but the broccoli flavor is wonderfully intense, as if each little particle of broccoli has been trained to burrow into my taste buds at the molecular level. Oh wait, maybe it has. The peanut works well with the beef, and the miniature fried broccoli florets add great texture. I agree with what Grace said about feeling like a giant eating miniature food.

NINE: Hot Potato Cold Potato (This is their name, and again, it works.)

This one is tiny. It’s a small ramekin, like something you’d put soy sauce in, filled with what looks like potato soup. (Yay! Positive identification!) The bowl sprouts a miniature stainless steel pin, on which is skewered a small butter cube, a small piece of Parmesan, and finally, a marble-sized white ball with a slice of black truffle balanced on top. Instructions: pull the pin, which deposits the butter, Parmesan, and what turns out to be a hot potato ball with the truffle on top into cold truffled potato soup, then slurp it all down together. It’s wonderful; the contrast between the hot mashed potato and the cold soup in my mouth reminds me that we very rarely eat hot and cold things together. I set the tiny bowl down and find it’s made of wax, though I’m not sure why.

I play with the pin, which now looks like a medieval medical device. The woman at the next table is performing bread voodoo with her pin, stabbing it into the paprika roll that came paired with the previous course. (Yes, some of these courses have bread “pairings,” at no extra charge.)

TEN: Brick Lamb

By this time, we’re beginning to get really tired, as I’m sure you are of reading this. Lines are starting to blur. I am almost ready to go home. It seems somewhat dangerous, then, when the model-waiters bring out hot sizzling terra cotta bricks—now, when we’re most likely to let our attention lapse and burn ourselves.

Nevertheless, the bricks are here, and the rosemary is finally put to use – the waiters nestle the end of each sprig into a small hole in the brick, so that the heat from the brick forces the rosemary needles to give their scent up and send it to mingle with the three pieces of lamb searing in front of us. The lamb cubes are each decorated with something different, first mastic, the resin of a type of evergreen tree typically used to flavor gums and candy most famously in Greece and the middle east, then dates and sherry vinegar, then red wine-braised cabbage. After so many courses of squishy food, I’m loving how I have to chew the lamb, but I’m the only one that finishes. One of us leaves the lamb completely untouched. We are overwhelmed. I’d love a salad.

ELEVEN: Bacon in Headgear

Now this, one of Alinea's poster children: a flat piece of applewood-smoked bacon, drizzled with butterscotch and wrapped in some sort of apple leather with a sprig of thyme, is suspended from a wire as if on some sort of trapeze. The wire is connected on both sides to a semicircular metal frame that reminds me of orthodontic headgear. We're instructed to rock it back and forth a bit, and as we do so, the meat slides back and forth. If Calder did bacon, this would have been included in his circus sculptures. Model-waiter #1 tells us it's our culinary bridge between savory and sweet, a sort of introduction to dessert, and he's right, it's delicious, only I'm so sick of meat I have trouble appreciating it.

TWELVE: Creamsicle, Modernized

The first dessert arrives: it's a little napoleon of orange sorbet, olive oil ice cream, and almond tuile, surrounded by alternating piles of chamomile pudding, dehydrated picholine olives, and dehydrated olive oil spiced with vanilla, garnished with olive brine gelee and a basil jelly that must be the essence of all the basil in Italy. I can't even begin to guess how one reduces a liquid fat like olive oil to a powder.

The sorbet/ice cream combo is a little ho-hum after the previous courses; its creamsicle flavor seems so pedestrian compared to, say, dehydrated olives. But I like it. I want to send the rest to NASA – if I want olive oil, I'll pour it, thank you, and even though I love the way it mixes with vanilla, I really don't understand this fascination with solidifying things that are clearly meant to be liquids. How about a simple vanilla-olive oil cake? I make the mistake of trying the chamomile pudding on its own, rather than blended with some of the other ingredients, and I can't shake the thought that it just tastes like bad herbal soap. Combined with the dry, sandy texture of the dehydrated ingredients (you know how much I like dry things), the various garnishes make me physically recoil.

Model-waiter #2 can tell we don't like it, and chastises us. "This dish is typically quite successful," he intones, as if knowing that other people have liked it will change our minds instantaneously. He skulks away with our half-eaten plates, looking wounded.

The model-waiters move the water glasses again, as if playing a game of chess only they know about. Grace gets annoyed and starts moving the little silverware pillow-plates around, nudging them so they're just off-center, and we get all giggly again as one waiter nonchalantly returns and fixes everything.

THIRTEEN: The Hairball

We're over twelve courses, and we're not sure how many we have left. We promise each other we'll fast the next day, baffled by what the caloric content of our meal thus far must be. We're getting giddy, overtired, overstimulated.

Apparently Alinea can sense this. It's their time to have fun with us.

We're almost in lockstep with the table next to us; somehow we've caught up to them and we watch as model-waiter #2 presents them with what he calls The Antenna.

He carries a small, heavy-looking stainless steel disk, which sprouts a foot-long flexible wire. At the end of the wire is what appears to be a giant chocolate hairball about the size of a golf ball; it bobs and weaves on the bending wire as he approaches the table. Everyone's laughing, and I collapse into giggles when I picture my cat producing this exquisitely formed hairball and presenting it to me like this. Apparently I'm the only one who doesn't immediately associate the hairball with pubic hair.

I finally recover and watch the waiter as he turns to face the guest. He sets the disk on the table, tilted toward the guest so that the wire leaves the table at about a 45-degree angle and the hairball is bobbing dangerously (and suggestively) close to the guest's mouth. She sort of has to dodge it to avoid losing an eye.

We're all laughing, my table and the next. MW #1 tells us we're not allowed to use our hands, and we're meant to take it all in one bite. Now we're actually crying because our imaginations are running wild, watching each other perform oral sex on a miniature cake made of frozen licorice puree, orange confit, and anise hyssop and shrouded in spun licorice sugar. I hate licorice, but I don't taste it because I'm still laughing so hard, and trying my best not to think of pubic hair.

One of my friends opts out. One of the other guests eats half, and decides she's done.

MW #2: Are you going to enjoy this?

Guest: I've enjoyed it as much as I'm going to.

More giggles.

What do they serve the men?

FOURTEEN: Overkill

Grace moves the pillows again, and a waiter rearranges them once more. My stomach aches from laughing.

I think someone's kid designed the next course. All the elements are interesting and delicious, but the presentation, which must have been some Picasso-inspired attempt at artful disorganization, is messy and overwhelming. There's a perfect, light, refreshing cube of lemongrass ice, a squiggle of chocolate ganache that reminds me of Bill Cosby and must have come out of a toothpaste tube, a tart, tropical squirt of passion fruit gelee, a perfectly smooth (as in yogurt-textured) rice pudding that I'd gladly eat by the vat, a miniscule dollop of soy sauce gel (yes, soy sauce for dessert), and a baton of sticky soy

marshmallow. I try to eat each element alone, but the sheer number of flavors disappoints me. It's at least a month's worth of dessert flavors, and I'm hardly in the mood for one.

FIFTEEN: Caramel Donut Lollipop

Alinea has all of its tableware hand-crafted, so each dish/platter/doo-hickey is created specifically for the food it supports. Now we get a beautifully-machined stainless steel and copper disk, on which the model-waiters place something that looks like an upside-down version of one of those new whisks that are actually multiple metal sticks with balls at the end. Nestled in where the sticks meet the base of the object is a giant ball of tempura-fried caramel studded with preserved Meyer lemon rind. It's been speared with a giant cinnamon stick, so that when I dislodge the fried caramel from its home, a strong cinnamon scent shoots up my nose. Despite the late hour, I'm smitten; I love learning to associate tempura lightness with sweet brown sugar and spice, and the caramel inside is warm and gooey but not so liquidy that it comes dribbling out.

It's funny to see how my notes mirror my energy level – for the first five courses, I catch everything, then the whole experience starts to get blurry, as if my drink has been spiked. Before I know it we're hemorrhaging money and thanking the waiters for take-home menus that have been individualized to reflect our particular Alinea experience. Then we're back in the steely entrance hallway, then out in the night air, and the maitre d' is opening the door to a waiting cab. It's over.