



“Grace is built on four pillars, food, wine, ambience, and service. We try to balance all four so that no one is greater than another.”  
 - EXECUTIVE CHEF CURTIS DUFFY

## AMAZING GRACE

Chicago’s Grace restaurant serves up a divine experience *by* M.Linda Lee

**IT IS ODDLY QUIET IN GRACE’S KITCHEN.** On one end, a young chef rolls out long strips of dough, cuts them into two-inch squares, then pushes and folds the dough repeatedly to craft tiny rolls. On the other end, a cadre of white-coated chefs ready the evening’s dishes and ingredients on spotless white granite countertops. The atmosphere is busy but calm, intense but organized. It is the ambience of a group of people bent on achieving culinary perfection.

Executive chef Curtis Duffy expects nothing less. The forty-year-old chef owns Grace with partner and general manager Michael Muser, with whom he worked for two years—and garnered two Michelin

stars—at Avenues in Chicago’s Peninsula hotel. Duffy’s first restaurant, Grace received two Michelin stars eleven months after it opened in 2012 and was recently awarded the coveted rating of three stars for 2015.

“It’s mind-boggling,” muses the chef, as he reflects on winning Michelin’s highest accolade. “I still get emotional when I think about it. I am so incredibly proud of what we have achieved in two years. Three stars means you are one of the best in the world.”

Located in a former pickled herring factory on West Randolph Street in Chicago’s Near West Side, the restaurant hides behind a frosted-glass window, its one-word name scrawled inconspicuously on the door in small, flowing script.



There is nothing inconspicuous about the cuisine, however, which the chef describes as “thoughtful-progressive.” “Thoughtful” encompasses the energy spent searching for the best ingredients and developing relationships with farmers, foragers, and fishmongers. It also covers the time the staff spends developing a dish from conceptualization to the point where it is added to the ever-changing menu. “The progressive part,” Duffy explains, “refers to the modern techniques we use to make the cuisine exciting and thought-provoking.” His is a personal cuisine, based on his own fondness for clean, healthy, herb-infused food made with a minimum of fat and dairy.

Attention is paid to every detail, from the horseshoe-shaped leather chairs that hug diners in the sixty-four-seat champagne-hued room to the tiny

#### AWARDS

Three Michelin Stars

AAA's Five Diamond Rating

Forbes Travel Guide's 5 Star Rating

Robb Report's Best Restaurant in the World 2013

Chicago Magazine's Best New Restaurant

Eater National's Chef of the Year

sinuous ribbons of jewel-toned raw vegetables that garnish certain dishes. The decor, food, and service all befit the restaurant's name, which speaks of elegance, warmth, and refinement. “Grace is built on four pillars,” the chef says. “Food, wine, ambiance, and service. We try to balance all four so that no one is greater than another.”

On the eight- to twelve-course menu, two different tastings entice guests: Flora (the vegetarian version) and Fauna. Astutely curated by Michael Muser and favoring varietals from the Loire Valley, the Rhône region, Alsace, and Germany, the wine list spans forty-five pages. To avoid a commitment to just one bottle, the staff will gladly match wines to each course. Pairings are sometimes unexpected, such as a 2013 Vouvray Champalou “La Cuvée des Fondraux” served

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL MUSER/GRACE RESTAURANT

with Miyazaki beef to complement the Vietnamese flavors in the dish.

The cuisine is intricate, playful, and wildly creative. One night, a V-shaped glass containing luscious chunks of Alaskan king crab is topped with a hard sugar coating resembling that on a crème brûlée. This

shell, however, is made from three types of sugar, which are melted together, hardened, chipped to form a powder, sparked with heat from Japanese togarashi, and warmed in a round mold before it hardens again. The disk is painstakingly dotted with floral cream, trout roe, and tiny lemon mint leaves. Crack the shell, and the toppings



#### GOOD EATS

GRACE RESTAURANT

652 W Randolph Street Chicago, IL 60661 (312) 234-9494

Dinner service begins at 5:30 pm Tuesday through Saturday

grace-restaurant.com

all tumble into the glass, melding their flavors with the crab and broth below.

Duffy was introduced to cooking in a sixth-grade home economics class by Ruth Snider, a teacher who planted the idea of being a chef in the young boy's head. He got his first job in a restaurant washing dishes at age fourteen. Soon he was doing prep work, seduced by the instant gratification of doing something with his hands, even a task as pedestrian as peeling potatoes. In his junior year of high school, he entered a culinary program, and began working in professional kitchens the following year. “I felt so at home in the kitchen,” Duffy says. “That was where I wanted to be.”

And that was the place in which the middle child of three Duffy siblings found solace during the later years of his rocky childhood in Colorado. His parents split up when he was a teenager, and several months later, his despondent father shot Duffy's mother and then turned the gun on himself. Curtis was nineteen at the time.

To distract himself from the pain, he took refuge in the kitchen. One restaurant job led to another, fueled by his drive to learn and winning state food competitions, until the young chef eventually moved to Chicago to work with Charlie Trotter. From Trotter, Duffy learned how to source stellar ingredients and develop relationships with their producers. He later left Trotter's eponymous restaurant to work with Grant Achatz at Trio in Evanston, Illinois, and when Achatz opened Alinea (Chicago's other Michelin three-star restaurant), Duffy served as his mentor's chef de cuisine.

When he's not in the kitchen (which isn't often), Duffy studies martial arts—there's that intense focus again—unwinds on the open road on his Harley, and relishes his Sundays off with his two daughters, aged nine and six.

A warm smile flashes across Duffy's otherwise serious face when he talks about his daughters. His time with them may be limited, given the constraints of his job, but when he is with them, Duffy gives the girls his undivided attention. “My phone is always off during my Sundays with my daughters,” notes the divorced chef. “That time is just for them.”

Like a phoenix, Curtis Duffy has risen from the tragedies of his past to grace the pinnacle of his profession. Yet he still pushes himself and his staff to be better each day, ever reaching for the stars. “At Grace,” he says, “we constantly strive to be creative with our food, to refine our service, and to touch every table with great passion.”