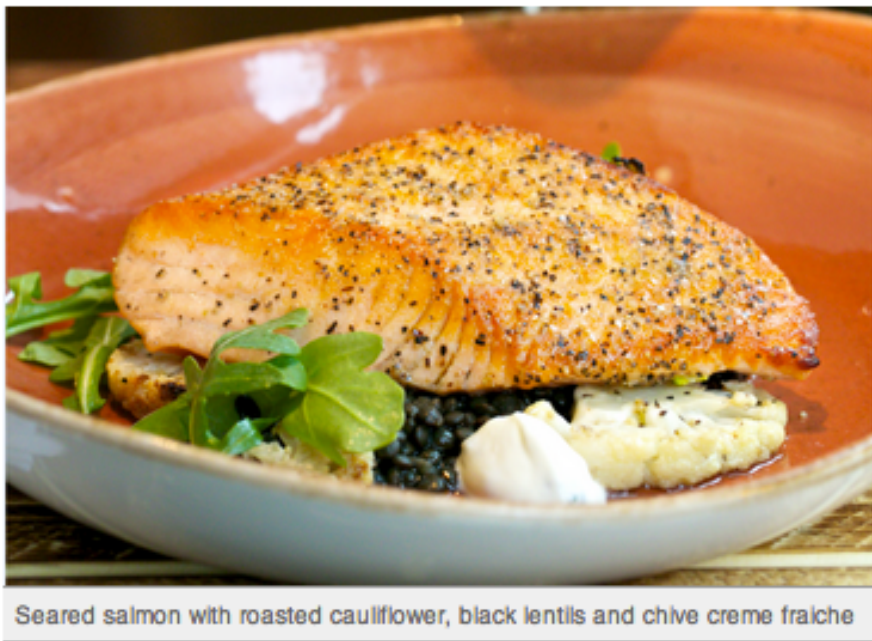


# CRAIN'S

CHICAGO BUSINESS.

## ON DINING

### The Wit introduces 'certified healthy' menu items



It's the omnivore's dilemma: How to eat healthfully but still be satisfied?

Adding vegetables and fruits while minimizing, fats, fried foods, sugar and gluten is a goal for many restaurant diners.

How to do it? Enter the SPE Certified program. Founded by a Belgian restaurateur and named for the Latin phrase *sanitas per escam* ("health through food"), it launched in New York in 2012.

While third-party certification programs typically cover entire restaurants or meals or focus on gluten-free and other specific features, SPE certifies individual dishes. Culinary nutritionists work with chefs to make sure their creations meet extensive criteria derived from dietary recommendations of health and governmental organizations.

They're required to use seasonal ingredients — with an emphasis on vegetables and fruits — sourced from local farmers and vendors as much as possible. Cream and butter are excluded from savory recipes. Grilling is prohibited (charred protein can contain carcinogens), as is deep-frying. There are guidelines for fats, sodium and portion size, yet the goal is not to count calories but to increase "nutrient density" (the amount of nutrients per calorie).

SPE's first foray into full-service dining and hotels in the Midwest is at the Wit Hotel, which last month introduced 13 SPE-certified items on its breakfast, lunch and dinner menus at State and Lake Chicago Tavern and for in-room dining. These include an egg white omelet with buttercup squash, dino kale, farro, goat cheese and potato (\$13), a lunch and dinner appetizer of deviled eggs with duck bacon, sweet potato and wild rice (\$8), butternut squash soup with house-made lamb bacon, pumpkin seed pesto and candied fennel (\$8) and entrees such as seared salmon with roasted cauliflower, black lentils and chive creme fraiche (\$16) and mustard maple glazed Amish chicken with pumpkin-mizuna panzanella and pickled onion (\$23, dinner only). The options are marked on the State and Lake menus with the SPE logo and listed on a separate menu, too.



Evan Percoco, executive chef of the Wit

Evan Percoco, executive chef at the Wit, said he was initially skeptical about certification but quickly became a convert. "The transition was very easy because many of the dishes planned for our winter menu were close enough to SPE guidelines that they only needed to be tweaked," he said.

The filling for the deviled eggs, for example, got a nutritional boost from pureed sweet potato, and the addition of salad upped the vegetable content of the whole dish. "We used smoked paprika as part of the curing process to get the smoky flavor of the duck bacon," Mr. Percoco said.

The only change in the roast mustard maple glazed chicken — humanely raised, air-chilled birds from Crystal Valley Pure & Natural Chicken in Indiana — was switching the bread in the panzanella from pumpernickel to multigrain. Pastry chef Toni Roberts' avocado brownie with raspberry fudge sorbet, which uses mashed avocado in place of butter and honey instead of sugar, should be a shoo-in for certification, he adds. "There's nothing bad for you in it, it's terrific and if you didn't know about the avocado, you'd never guess."

Although Mr. Percoco has to submit recipes for each of his seasonal menus for SPE certification and undergo audits, he's looking forward to a process he calls a "win-win" for farmers, the hotel and customers. In spring, the Wit will introduce SPE-certified shared plates for Roof, its rooftop lounge, and a dedicated SPE-certified

menu for banquets and catering. "Many of our clients are in medical and other health and wellness fields, so I think they'll be interested in offering this type of menu for business and corporate functions," he said.

Ellen Malloy, co-founder of Chicago-based Morsel (formerly Restaurant Intelligence Agency), sees certification programs like SPE as an emerging trend, especially at institutions ranging from quick-serve restaurants to hotels. "Food has become confusing and scary," she said. "People don't know where to go for easily digestible information about what they're eating, so anything that helps them understand the basics in an honest way is useful."

SPE also certifies food at fast-casual Lyfe Kitchen River North and at Chicago-based Farmers Fridge, a fledgling vending-machine concept.

<http://www.chicagobusiness.com/article/20140214/BLOGS09/140219860/the-wit-introduces-certified-healthy-menu-items>