

EATER



Virtue *Chicago, IL*

What: A thoroughly Chicago restaurant with a multicultural approach to Southern cuisine.

Why: There's plenty of new construction in Hyde Park, Chicago's South Side neighborhood that's home to the University of Chicago. Locals are protective of this traditionally progressive and diverse neighborhood. They worry that out-of-town chains and cookie-cutter restaurants will decimate the area's unique character. Virtue is not one of their concerns.

At Virtue, veteran chef Erick Williams honors his family's Southern roots, drawing as much from his experiences as a born-and-bred Chicagoan as from his grandmother's recipes, which come by way of Mississippi. Diners looking for Southern classics will find much to love on Virtue's menu, whether in cornmeal-covered fried chicken gizzards or blackened catfish with Carolina Gold rice.

But Virtue's most potent dish is the cauliflower, its seemingly humble meat-free option. It reveals Williams's layered approach to cooking, which combines culinary inspiration from the South, Chicago, his fine dining background, his family history, and the world. The braised cauliflower steak is finished on the grill, creating a crisp crust over the vegetable's fork-tender innards. Williams plates it with cashew dukkah (an Egyptian spice blend) and "root cellar vegetables" presented as giardiniera — the pickle blend Chicagoans enjoy most on Italian beef sandwiches.

There's a welcoming energy inside the dining room, with locals celebrating the arrival of a top-notch restaurant, one that represents them. And at the end of the day, these are the customers who make Hyde Park one of Chicago's quirkiest neighborhoods, and Virtue one of the country's best new restaurants. | VirtueRestaurant.com

— Ashok Selvam, *Eater Chicago* senior editor