

Mighty bites



Chef Maneet Chauhan of Vermilion

'Experiment with different regions. Don't be afraid to do traditional French paté or charcuterie and

Small plates pack big flavor in the newest trend

By Heather Shouse | Special to the Tribune

It's close to 10 on a balmy summer night. Groups of friends and couples alike pack the long wooden communal tables at a buzzing neighborhood restaurant. The decibels grow as conversation competes with the latest Gipsy Kings album. The passing of plates and clinking of glasses show no sign of letting up. Whizzing past are servers with small earthenware *cazuelas* brimming with braised octopus, miniature *cocottes* piping with garlicky cod *brandade* and wine *carafinas* holding just enough Rioja for two.

No, this is not Barcelona; this is Chicago, embracing small-plates dining as its newest culinary trend.

The restaurant is Avec, chef Paul Kahan's latest contribution to the city. It has been packing in tourists and local foodies alike since opening its doors last September. The tiny, cigar box of a restaurant sought not to be comfy, themed or elaborate but to bring people together over small plates of simple Mediterranean classics and conversation-starter wines.

Alain Ducasse jumped the trend with the small tastes of Spoon in Paris, Jose Andres delighted Washington, D.C., with his Mediterranean *meze* at Zaytinya, and Mario Batali is once again wowing New Yorkers with Casa Mono. Here in Chicago in the year since Avec kick-started a buzz, small-plates restaurants have sprung up all over town. The jazzed-up tapas spot Sangria, Shawn McClain's vegetarian enclave Green Zebra, Glenview's French-

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