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10 eateries curated by our editors

**GOOD TASTE**  
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# For hundreds of years, the steakhouse restaurant has occupied a solid place in American culinary imagination and legacy.

No dining experience has consistently captured the hearts and stomachs across the vast 50 states quite like it. To eat at a steakhouse is to eat a big, juicy chunk of America, to absorb its essence, stories, and perhaps most of all, its possibilities.

Having survived food trends as they have come and gone, it's a bona fide institution, even if it has had bouts of fading into obscurity now and again. The history of the steakhouse is a long one and can be traced back to the 17th-century chophouses of London, which served slices of meat in individual portions that came to be known as "chops." That tradition, imported into the U.S., manifested itself as "beefsteak banquets" in the mid-800s, where New York City's working class would get together to eat beef tenderloin while often raising money for political causes and campaigns. The practice eventually declined — but America's appetite for beef did not.

Steakhouses proliferated considerably in cities across America, including Detroit, and gained popularity, bringing in the kind of business and longevity hard to come by in the restaurant industry. Some, like the popular Carl's Chop House (built in 1951) were eventually closed and demolished. Some like London Chop House, which opened its doors in 1938 and was named one of the top 10 restaurants in the country in 1964 by James Beard, have come back to life. After shuttering in 1991, the iconic restaurant reopened in 2012 after a year of refurbishment. And others, like Capers on Detroit's east side, have stuck around since they opened in the 1980s, earning a loyal customer base for their steak by the ounce.

But in the heart of downtown, Prime • Proper is carving out a different kind of space in steakhouse culture, attempting to bring the category into the 21st century on its own terms, while paying homage to all that came before it. The eatery, which opened in November 2017, has brought a level of fine dining, decadent design, and top-notch hospitality to the rapidly growing Detroit restaurant scene.

Located across the park where Michigan's original State Capitol was based in the 1800s before it moved to Lansing, Prime • Proper occupies the street-level floor of the 11-story Capitol Park Loft building, built in 1912 by Leonard B. Willeke, a Cincinnati-born architect who moved to Detroit and practiced here until his death. It originally housed Peter Smith & Sons, a grocer that occupied several floors of the building, but it's perhaps most remembered for the White Room Studio, where Aretha Franklin, Red Hot Chili Peppers, and D2 recorded. Kid Rock, who was a janitor at White Room, recorded his fourth studio album, *Devil Without a Cause*, and several other





**The Key Players**

(From left) Executive Butcher Master Agostea, Executive Chef Ryan Prentiss, and Executive Pastry Chef Sharyn Harding head up the kitchen at Prime + Proper.



(Clockwise from top) Prime + Proper and Heirloom Hospitality owner Jeremy Sisson; Proper Plateau oysters, lobster, shrimp cocktail, king salmon bar (L to R), king crab, tuna poke, and champagne mignonette served with cocktail, mustard, and umami sauce; Sommelier Liz Martinez; Kansas City Strip an 18-oz. USDA Prime steak



hits there, too. The building remained vacant from 2009 to 2016, when Grand Rapids-based developer Richard Karp purchased it and began the process of renovating it into a 63-unit residential complex. A year later, Prime + Proper made its debut.

While the steakhouses of yesteryear are primarily remembered for their white tablecloths and leather booths, the Prime + Proper experience is an ode to beautifully executed, extremely detailed design. Led by Birmingham-based McIntosh Paris Associates, the interior is an Art Deco-inspired black and white space that seats 165, plus 24 in a private dining room. A 100-year-old restored marble staircase with bronze railing connects the restaurant's two floors, while a wood-burning grill and butcher counter anchor the dining room and ceiling fixtures add the right amount of light.

The brainchild of restaurateur Jeremy Sasson, a metro Detroit native and head of Heirloom Hospitality Group, Prime + Proper joins the growing list of ambitious restaurants that Sasson has developed. Previous projects of his include Townhouse Birmingham, the popular American bistro, which opened in 2010, and its little sister Townhouse Detroit, situated less than half a mile from Prime + Proper.

to the dish is equal hot and cold elements — keeping potatoes as you mix in chilled butter (if you're talking pounds here, not tablespoons). If you're not interested in them being beaten vigorously to perfection, they also arrive as hash browns with sweet leeks or gnocchi accompanied by thyme and Tuscan kale.

Sourcing USDA prime beef from Purity Meat Co. from Chicago and Fairway Packing in Detroit's Eastern Market, the restaurant boasts an in-house dry aging vault with rock salt-lined walls. The vault is visible to customers where beef is aged anywhere from four to six weeks, lamb no less than two weeks, and ducks, seven days. Steak offerings include everything from an 8 oz. filet mignon to a 32 oz. Tomahawk Ribeye to Japanese Wagyu.

Do you like edible accessories with your meat? There's a lot to choose from here: bacon and eggs, foie gras "salt," lobster claws and Point Reyes Blue Cheese — a three-month-old aged gluten-free blue cheese made from raw cow's milk from the Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Company in California.

Prime + Proper's meat counter also doubles as a butcher shop where restaurant guests can purchase cuts to enjoy at home.

Then there's the seafood — coal-grilled oysters

In this modern era, there's only one place to start your search for anything, and that's on social media. After doing his research, Sasson eventually came across Walter Apfelbaum on Instagram who grew up in an all-German household in New Jersey and learned the trade after befriending a butcher, several apprenticeships, and training in Europe. Apfelbaum was working as the head butcher at NY Steak in the Seminole Casino Coconut Creek in Southern Florida when Sasson came calling.

"I think our guests are looking for transparency — they want to know the fish didn't look great tonight or if one particular wine by the glass is not available, those types of transparencies are key," Sasson says. "I happened to come across Walter and I could tell he really understood that transparency and guest experience."

Apfelbaum helped fulfill one really important spoke in the wheel, and next up was the executive chef position. Sasson did not have to go too far — Ryan Prentiss, who had previously joined Townhouse Birmingham as a line cook in 2014, came on board and helped maintain the balance between culinary refinements without being pretentious, Sasson says.

Next up was the search for a sommelier. Liz

## "We're a place that has no limits in what it takes us to get you what you want." Jeremy Sasson, owner

Though he hasn't waited tables or worked the line, Sasson has a different kind of proximity to the business of food, as a lifelong "professional" restaurant patron. His earliest memories of dining out stem back to around the time he was 6 years old, where, thanks to the demands of his parents' work life, his family made it more of a tradition to get together around the restaurant table than the one in their kitchen. It was here where he honed in on the importance of the vast amount of needs people had when being served a meal. "The ability for me to understand people's preferences are the most important part of servicing at a restaurant," Sasson says. "We consistently care about the smallest details and why they make it or break it for someone."

In essence, this is the ethos of Prime + Proper, a place where, Sasson says, he was able to put into motion the idea of going the extra mile for every single guest experience. "What is it you want, what is it you love, how can we best cater to your preferences? We're a place that has no limits in what it takes us to get you what you want." That line runs through the backbone of Prime + Proper.

The most obvious exemplification of that is the food. The extensive menu features elevated versions of steakhouse favorites. Potatoes, for example, are not just potatoes. They're ash-roasted or even pureed à la Robuchon, a Michelin-starred chef whose mashed potato recipe developed at Jamin in Paris in the 1980s is considered the best in the world. The technique

are served with seaweed and preserved lemon butter and the bigeye tuna poke with sesame, soy, avocado, scallions, macadamia nut, and jalapeño shines as a standout appetizer. If you're looking to indulge, there are also several kinds of caviar, including the Classic Osetra and Smoked Steelhead Trout, all of which are served with gold lakes, deviled egg puree, creme fraiche, and capers, a combination of flavors that complement the caviar without overwhelming it.

If comfort is what you're after, buttermilk-brined fried chicken, mac and cheese, and the corn creme brulee round out the offerings nicely, but if there's something else you're looking for, a Philly cheese steak or even a hot dog — don't hesitate to ask.

The fine dining experience at Prime + Proper, Sasson says, is rooted in making sure they give people what they want, and the heart of that sentiment is a large staff that he considers his most valuable asset.

"Most things that we buy in the restaurant industry are commodities — prime beef is still a grade of commodity, but the one thing that is not a commodity is the caliber of the people who are participating in executing a gift experience," Sasson says. "One thing that cannot be duplicated is the caliber of quality and passion that we have to take this story and make it a great one." It's true: there is no good restaurant without good people, and in his quest to develop Prime + Proper, Sasson first went looking for a butcher committed to the craft a year before the restaurant opened.

Martinez, who cut her teeth at Rick Bayless' Mexican-inspired fine dining restaurant, Topolobampo, was the right fit. James Beard award-nominated sommelier hails from Denver, lived in San Francisco for 20 years, and was working at The Purple Pig in Chicago when Sasson first called her. She answered and took the job without ever coming to Detroit to visit, she says. The possibilities in Detroit are what drew her.

"I like developing people and wanted to focus on that," she says. "You have a lot more creativity and passion because people are hustling still, they care more about what's going on." Prime + Proper's robust wine list, which Martinez created from scratch, is a blend of both old and new world, featuring choices like the Brunello di Montalcino, made from the Sangiovese grape in Italy's Montalcino region, the legendary Chateau Musar, from Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, and options from California, including Friele Mountain Valley's 2015 merlot, aged 14 months in French oak barrels prior to blending. If you're celebrating and in the mood for champagne, the Jacquesson 755 Degorgement Tardif — aged nine years before disgorgement — is a top choice.

Martinez and her hospitality-led approach have thrived in her time at Prime + Proper. Last year's North American International Auto Show ended up generating the biggest wine sales of Martinez's life, she says. "I was already so crazy busy, and then there was a guy ordering these really old Bordeaux

**“One thing that cannot be duplicated is the caliber of quality and passion that we have to take this story and make it a great one.”** Jeremy Sasson, owner



**Fresh Meat**

Aplebaum (opposite page) showcases his butchery in various realms of Prime + Proper from the rock salt-lined dry-aging room to the butcher counter, which anchors the dining room.

— I felt like I was doing surgery on the chefs, working with my gloves on.”

Though she's hoping to do wine tastings and dinner in the future, investing in the team she's working with is a constant goal for Motillon: “We've elected to develop people,” she says.

Sanson agrees — the willingness to teach and learn is one of the five core “Prime Values” of the restaurant. “We feel we owe it back to the city of Detroit, we are responsible to be teachers here,” Sanson says. “There is no local culinary school, no hospitality school in downtown Detroit, if you have people who want to be part of developing guest experiences and participating in servicing the community, every night is a responsibility for us.”

Prime + Proper's highly skilled team is rounded out by the talented Sharyn Harding, a pastry chef who came to Detroit by way of Las Vegas, where she served as assistant executive pastry chef of restaurants for Wynn Resorts.

Don't miss Harding's Baklava Sundae, a sweet concoction of Michigan honey ice cream, pieces of baklava bits, candied pistachio, and topped with shuddled phyllo, a dessert even a lifelong traditional baklava eater like me must pay respect to. The Strawberry Pitaya Costa is another must try, ending your dinner on a high, and sweet note.

As Prime + Proper solidifies its place in Detroit's restaurant scene, Sanson is looking to continue developing the fine dining restaurant — lunch and brunch options, and a bit of travel and research with his team — while also expanding into other restaurant ventures through Heilloom.

“We definitely have an appetite and want to continue doing more in the city,” Sanson says. “We love what we're doing in Detroit and want to keep doing it here.” That includes developing different food and experiences, but one thing is for sure: a vision built on cultivating the people you work with is bound to be fruitful.

“I grew up playing football, I used to think that was the greatest team sport,” Sanson says drawing a comparison to the collaborative environment in the culinary field. “I think today, restaurants are the greatest team sport — nobody can do it without the right caliber of people around them.” ■

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#### High Line

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#### Sugar on Top

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