



Clockwise from top left: Classic cocktails range from Old Fashioneds to cosmopolitans; the Fort Sheridan room seats up to 35 for private events; the menu features seven cuts of steak; the bar at Sophia Steak Lake Forest.



# ALL THE BALLYHOO

With the opening of its latest hot spot, Sophia Steak Lake Forest, Ballyhoo Hospitality cements its status as a North Shore dining force to be reckoned with.

BY J.P. ANDERSON

As the co-founders of Ballyhoo Hospitality, husband-and-wife team Ryan and Anna O'Donnell are known for beloved downtown concepts like Gemini Bistro and Coda di Volpe. In the past few years, however, the pair have turned their attention to the North Shore, with impressive results: Sophia Steak—a collab with Chicago steakhouse legend Glenn Keefer—gained immediate buzz on its spring 2020 opening in Wilmette, followed by chic French bistro Pomeroy in Winnetka (still the hottest table in town) and throwback family spot Buck Russell's Bakery & Sandwich Shop, also in Wilmette. Now, the partners have expanded their Sophia Steak concept into new territory with their first Lake Forest restaurant (181 E. Laurel Ave., Lake Forest, [sophiasteak.com](http://sophiasteak.com)). Here, Ryan O'Donnell gives NS the scoop on the new restaurant.

Why do you think the Sophia Steak concept has been such a success? [It's] a tribute to our passion for hospitality and providing our guests with a feel-good dining experience. Starting in Lincoln Park, many of the community members have migrated to the North Shore suburbs (including Anna and myself) over the years. When we opened Sophia Steak Wilmette in 2020, we wanted to provide guests with an experience that they were accustomed to and received from some of our favorite restaurants in the city. Ensuring a partner like Glenn Keefer, with his extensive steakhouse background, was paramount to our success in many aspects. We did just that and continued to do so with the opening of Pomeroy and our second Sophia Steak in Lake Forest.

How is the new Lake Forest location different from the original? Staying true to the visual story we crafted in Wilmette was essential to us, so aside from the physical layout of the restaurants, they are very similar. That said, we

incorporated different design elements into Sophia Lake Forest, including a glowing warm ambient back bar made of Umbria quartz and four large, rounded, tan leather booths that have quickly become preferred seating. In the warmer months, our courtyard offers guests a transcending dining experience. In contrast, in Wilmette, they have the hustle and bustle of the community as they dine on the sidewalk cafe.

You've had great success on the North Shore—why do you think the area has been a good fit for Ballyhoo? The North Shore was a natural homecoming for us. We have an incredible foundation here, having spent many childhood years in the northern suburbs. It's an honor to work in and support the communities where I grew up. Ballyhoo is a good fit because we take pride in creating a space where guests can feel good when sitting down, and when leaving, for a great meal surrounded by warm hospitality and people that care about them without traveling far. ◦



ALL PHOTOS BY NEIL BURGER



From top: A selection of savory dishes at Sophia Steak Lake Forest; a cozy corner table beckons in the low-lit dining room.