

UNCLE MIKE'S IS A PLACE OF PLEASANT CONTRADICTIONS



On Fowl and Filipino Breakfast

By Michael Nagrant

THERE ARE A HALF-DOZEN PENGUINS GATHERED ON A HIGH LEDGE. It's not clear how they got there or what their purpose is. They could be suicidal, biding their last minutes while peering gingerly over the edge, contemplating the hot bath of ginger-chicken porridge or the searing splash that awaits in a duo of over-easy eggs perfumed with sesame oil below.

Then again, cantilevered above their tiny ceramic bodies towers a gigantic burnished saxophone, the kind you find in a secondhand store, though, not the kind with raspberry berets. When's the last time anyone's seen a raspberry beret in a secondhand store? No such thing likely exists. It's just a cheap juxtaposition of bad detail that Prince thinks makes his story sound authentic. The song "Raspberry Beret" is full of such things: "My boss was Mr. McGee" and "We went riding down by old man Johnson's farm." McGee might as well be Mr. Magoo and Johnson, Old McDonald, as fake as they surely are.

But, nonetheless, this is a beater of a sax, so old it could have been with John Coltrane on those late nights in a broken-down old New York hotel at 3am after a gig when, juiced from performing, he'd play for hours alone in his room to calm his nerves. Hotel patrons would complain. The manager would yell. And Coltrane would remove the reed from his mouthpiece, work the fingerings on his sax and continue to blow silent scales until he fell asleep.

Maybe those penguins were ready to bop, to blow Coltrane's "Lazy Bird," no doubt. Who knows? Such are the charming quirks of the Ukie village diner Uncle Mike's Place. Joining the penguins: a tin ceiling, plenty of exposed brick and a wall of flowery keystone ceramic tile, the type your grandmother has embedded above her bathtub in her all-pink bathroom, last rehabbed in 1973. There's also plenty of Hopperesque stainless trim, though very little chipped Formica. The tables here are topped with a lacquered woven rattan thatch that channels the Boston Celtics' parquet palace.

Tucked in between the rusting hulking anonymity of the Grand Avenue industrial corridor and the rehabbed-three-flat and graystone majesty of South Ukrainian Village, Uncle Mike's Place revels in incongruous juxtaposition. Tattoos and tinted tresses share space with khaki-clad working dads and bug-eye-bespectacled moms in diaphanous sundresses.

Owner "Uncle" Mike Grajewski is an old-school Chicagoan, a former sheet-metal worker who reinvented himself as a diner cook and restaurant owner. And though he's a Polish dude—this is Uncle Mike's most delicious twist of all—he serves the best Filipino breakfast in Chicago. It's a legacy of his marriage to Lucia, a Filipino, who also works here, handing out free bowls of chocolate lugao, an oatmeal-like pudding to the neighborhood kids.

Mike Grajewski serves up a savory cousin to that chocolate lugao, a chicken rice porridge perfumed with ginger that beats the pants off of any bowl of Chinese congee I've slurped in Chicago. He follows that with a plate of garlic fried rice, runny over-easy eggs fried in sesame oil flanked by pink grill-caramelized hunks of tocino, juicy annatto and anise-cured pork shoulder, and longanisa, anise-wine chorizo sausages so thick and plump Jack Sprat could finally get over his lean-eating habits.

There are also plenty of two egg specials, the "best damned marinated skirt steak east of the Pecos!" and other typical American breakfast dishes on offer. The cloud-like scratch pumpkin or mango blueberry pancakes here make a fine sweet counterpart to the meaty Filipino repast. The short-stack (two pancakes) is a bit of a misnomer, for these flapjacks are bigger than Rod Blagojevich's coiffure.

Really the only thing I don't like about Uncle Mike's Place, open since 1991, is that it took me so long to find the spot. And, I guess maybe I'd like to know how those penguins got there and what they're up to. Then again in the Google age where everything seems within reach, it's kind of nice to know there are still a few secrets left in the world.

Uncle Mike's Place, 1700 West Grand, (312)226-5318, unclemikesplace.com