



diningout

BY MICHAEL NAGRANT email diningout@suntimes.com | Follow @michaelnagrnt

MOM'S MENU

She's really in the kitchen at Rickshaw Republic

RICKSHAW REPUBLIC ★★★

2312 N. Lincoln;
(773) 697-4750;
www.rickshawrepublic.com

Hours: 11 a.m. – 2 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; 11 a.m. – 10 p.m. Saturday; 11 a.m. – 5 p.m. Sunday

Prices: appetizers \$5-\$8; entrees \$9-\$14; dessert \$4-\$5

Try: babi kecap, Rickshaw wings, black sticky rice dessert

In a bite: A family-run affair to remember, serving up some of Chicago's only Indonesian fare amid the incredible interior design work of local artisan Suhail.

KEY: ★★★★★ Extraordinary; ★★★★ Excellent; ★★★ Very Good; ★ Good; Zero stars: Poor



Rickshaw chicken wings are lacquered in a gooeey brown sugar and ginger sauce flecked with fiery red chili.

One of the bigger restaurant myths is that Mom's in the kitchen. What the chef (usually) really means when they say the recipes were adapted from mom is, "Mom's meatballs were desiccated golf balls. I went to culinary school and now I make mine with three different meats, soak the organic breadcrumbs in organic milk and simmer them in hand-squeezed tomato sauce." Given that, it makes it all that more extraordinary that at Rickshaw Republic, a new Indonesian restaurant in Lincoln Park, mom — Elice Setiawan — really is in the kitchen — and she's rockin' it.

Whether or not she likes the gig, only she knows. But I know that I love what she's doing. Her *babi kecap* (which comes from the separate menu dubbed, of course, "Mommy Special") is a swampy, rich primordial ooze of sweet soy, thick hunks of pork belly and tangy, earthy shiitake mushrooms.

Her Rickshaw fried chicken — crisp fried Brian Urlacher-sized chicken wings — are lacquered in a gooeey brown sugar and ginger sauce flecked with fiery red chili. They may be the best wings in Chicago, and if they're not, they're neck and neck with my favorites served at Lake View's Crisp. The only downside is that the sauce is so sticky, it coats every part of your face and hands.

Setiawan's *martabak*, Indonesia's answer to the Hot Pocket, is a mahogany-fried crisp pastry stuffed with custardy egg, rich beef and caramelized onion. Dipped in the sweet vinegary cucumber salad, it's a beautiful balance of richness cut by bright, lifting acidity.

The *batagor*, a heaping mound of crispy tofu dripping in rich peanut sauce is so

good, I consider going vegan. But I think better of that as I dip in to the flaky-fried fish and shrimp dumplings accompanying that beautiful bean curd.

The *nasi lemak*, a volcano-shaped mound of coconut rice dressed with fried anchovies, glistening oil-soaked, but crisp peanuts, curried pickles and coconut-curry dripping beef *rendang*, is a diminutive version of the family-style platters often served on festive Indonesian occasions.

I know this because Tommy (Setiawan's husband), a retired doctor, holds court behind the bar discussing Indonesian culinary rituals with the reverence of a shaman. He also pulls out laminated maps to show where he grew up near Jakarta and to hail the beauties of Bali. He tells stories of and takes great pride in the fact of President Obama's childhood in his homeland. Tommy's an incredibly warm gregarious presence.

But make no mistake, this is his son Oscar's show. Trained as an engineer, but growing bored behind a desk, Oscar dreamed of a career that would satisfy his inner foodie and his passion for photography. The best move Oscar made was hiring local designer Suhail to create the dreamland that is the Rickshaw Republic dining room. Located in a landmarked Adler & Sullivan building, ornamented with some of Louis Sullivan's first experimental friezes, you might spend so much time marveling over the exterior, that you never go inside. But when you do, you're enveloped in a world of intricate wood-cut panels, twirling Chinese umbrellas and a million-man march of ceiling-mounted marionettes.

Most of Suhail's best work has disappeared to the caprice of the fickle restaurant industry. The whirling mosaic of tile

he constructed at Del Toro, the futuristic landscape of Mod and the neo-modern Turkish stylings of Tizi Melloul, all fell under the wrecking sledgehammer when those restaurants closed. Because Rickshaw Republic is so good, I pray, hope and believe his work here will be around for a while.

Michael Nagrant is a local free-lance writer. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.



Babi kecap is a swampy, rich primordial ooze of sweet soy, thick hunks of pork belly and tangy, earthy shiitake mushrooms.

Try dipping the mahogany-fried crisp martabak in the sweet vinegary cucumber salad. You won't be disappointed. | ANDREW A. NELLES-SUN-TIMES MEDIA PHOTOS

SIDE DISHES



Fresh beef and lamb that have been cured for days fill the Parthenon's gyros platter. | J.GEIL - FOR SUN-TIMES MEDIA

Rickshaw Republic specializes in Indonesian street food. Here are some other great street food dishes served in Chicago restaurants:

THE PARTHENON, 314 S. Halsted; (312) 726-2407; www.theparthenon.com

Vibe: Bryll-creamed, Greek-god like waiters scream Opa over platters of fried cheese amid lots of rich wainscoting.

Flavor: Unlike most of the pre-processed frozen gyro cones served in cheap diners around town, the Parthenon gyro is constructed from layers of fresh beef and lamb, seasoned and cured for days before being fire-roasted on a turning spit. The result is the freshest gyro in town.

NHU LAN, 2612 W. Lawrence; (773) 878-9898; www.nhulansbakery.com

Vibe: Utilitarian white-tiled bakery with a smattering of cheap wooden tables and metal chairs.

Flavor: The No. 10 lemongrass tofu banh mi, a thin soy-marinated and lemongrass-perfumed bean curd that teams with tangy carrot, crisp daikon and spicy jalapeno that's then stuffed into a hot, crackling baguette may be a vegetarian's dream, but it also captures the carnivore's fantasy. I don't know how they do it, but the tofu eats like thin ribbons of ribeye.

CEMITAS PUEBLA, 2619 W. North; (773) 772-8435; www.cemitaspuebla.com

Vibe: Boxing posters and a bevy of 8 x 10 glossies featuring owner Tony Anteliz Sr. posing with Latin celebrities dot the walls of this low-key Humboldt Park storefront.

Flavor: Anteliz Sr. used to take his sons back to the Mexican town of Puebla to visit family. On those trips, his son Tony Jr. (the driving force of the dining room, usually clad in a White Sox cap) encountered spit-roasted pork tacos arabe marinated in a fermented pineapple brine, and local sesame buns stuffed with roasted meats showered in chipotle sauce, avocado and a rich mozzarella-like cheese from the nearby town of Chipilo known as a cemitita. Tony Jr. brought back his memories and faithfully re-created the tacos and the cemitas for Chicagoans.

Michael Nagrant