

eat & drink

Braised Beef Cheek 'Poutine'



Quote unquote

Are Bottlefork's tongue-in-cheek dishes tasty or just gimmicky?



Spinach and Artichoke 'Dip'

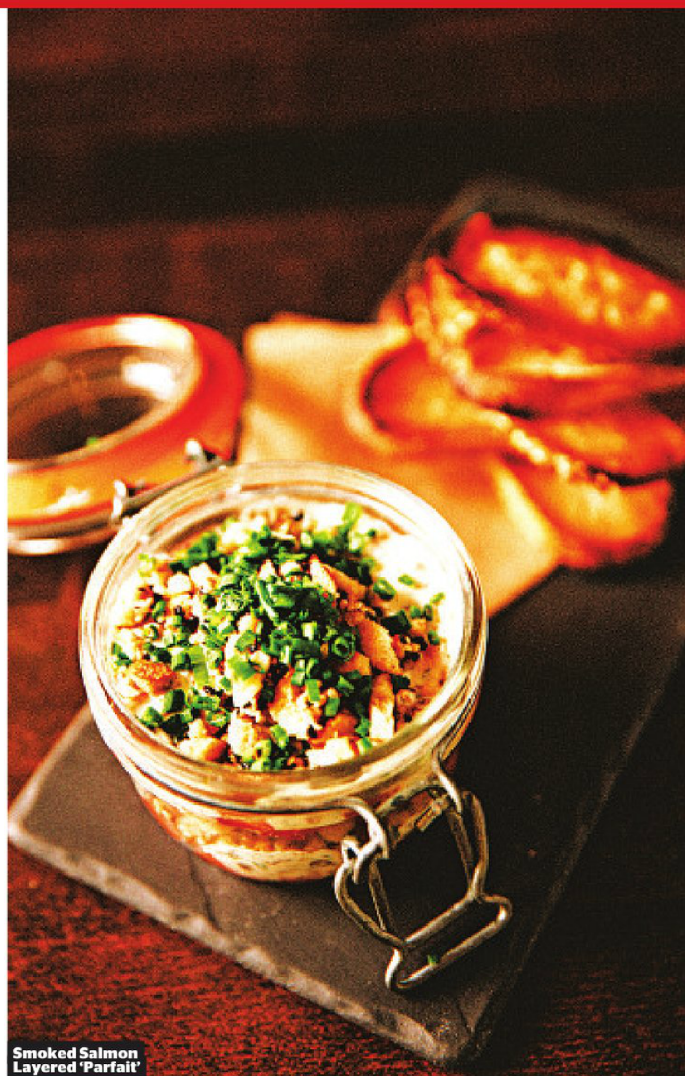
By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE
I tried to keep an open mind when walking into Bottlefork, the new River North restaurant from former Four Seasons' chef Kevin Hickey and Rockit Ranch Productions. I really, truly tried, even though everything I knew about the place was tempting me to mock it.

The photos of a \$30 cocktail (since jacked up to \$35, see **page 20**) named after "Saturday Night Live" sketch character Bill Brasky ("best damn salesman in the business")—filled with four kinds of whiskey and an ice cube embedded with a pin-up girl playing card—couldn't possibly be real, could it?

It wasn't just me. When I told friends I was headed to Bottlefork—named for the intersection of food and drink—they looked at me incredulously, like I'd just muttered

Bottlefork
441 N. Clark St. 312-955-1900
Off to a good start

"Chinaspork."
And then there's the Rockit Ranch crew—Arturo Gomez, Brad Young and Billy Dec—who have helped shape River North nightlife by opening hangouts such as Rockit Bar & Grill, The Underground and Sunda. It was tough to imagine the guys responsible for naming their tequila and taco bar Ay Chiwowa partnering with Hickey, a chef who displayed serious culinary chops at Allium in the Four Seasons hotel.
The obscene number of quotation marks used to describe dishes on the menu ("Popcorn" Sweetbreads, Braised Beef Cheek "Poutine") made me wonder if Hickey himself had downed one too many shots of tequila. The use of quotes to indicate irony or



Smoked Salmon Layered Parfait

an alternative meaning of a word is called a scare quote. As the Chicago Manual of Style says, “Scare quotes lose their force and irritate readers if overused.” I dug into Hickey’s quote-marked dishes to see whether they’d be impressive or just irritating.

Smoked Salmon Layered “Parfait” (\$12)

Parfait is a 100-plus-year-old frozen whipped ice cream dish that—let’s be honest—most of us are familiar with because of Dairy Queen’s Peanut Buster Parfait. The use of quotes is pretty apt here, as Hickey’s dish is not a frozen treat, but rather a reimagined bagel and lox plate featuring delicate house-smoked salmon potted in a tiny glass jar with a frigid dollop of creme fraiche, sharp red onion,

capers and toasted crouton, served with a side of house-made bagel chips. Considering that parfait is the French word for “perfect,” Hickey might not need quotes at all; this dish was almost faultless in flavor and technique, the only misstep being that some of the bagel chips were slightly gummy.

“Popcorn” Sweetbreads (\$7)

Sweetbreads are neither sweet nor bread: They are made from the endocrine glands of an animal. That might sound gross, but when properly prepared, they have a buttery richness reminiscent of foie gras. When prepared poorly, they’re dense and rubbery. Once again, I approve of Hickey’s quote usage here, as the tiny cuts of meat are deep-

fried until they look like bursting popcorn kernels. As with fresh hot popcorn, I gobbled up each of the crunchy sweetbread nuggets drizzled with tangy, spicy pepper aioli until they were gone.

“Bag” of Crisps & Eggs (\$4)

What you get here is a piping-hot bag of house-made potato chips dusted with malt vinegar powder and sea salt. Just before the bag is brought to the table, the chefs pour an egg, which has been cooked to precisely 63 degrees Celsius in a water bath (this technique lets the white set perfectly while the yolk is uniformly warm and runny) into the bag, and shake that thing like a Polaroid. The server then pours the contents of the bag into a bowl tableside. As for the need for quotes, I’m kind of torn here; though the chips are shaken in an actual bag, they’re dumped into a bowl. I was too busy enjoying the combination of the gooey yolk, crispy chips and bright acidity of the malt vinegar to really care. This is epically satisfying drunk food.

Spinach & Artichoke “Dip” Oysters (\$12)

The quotes are warranted in Hickey’s play on oysters Rockefeller and the ubiquitous bar snack that is spinach-artichoke dip. He bakes fresh oysters in the shell with a slather of blended spinach, artichoke, cream cheese and whipped egg yolk. The result is an airy souffle-topped oyster finished with a dash of Chicago’s very own, much maligned Jeppson’s malort. (The server told me it was Pernod; maybe he thought I’d gag if I knew the truth?) The oysters are served on top of toasted bread slices, which you use to dig the dip-topped oysters out of their shells. Malort haters should know that the bracing bitterness that makes you choke when you do shots of it cooks off here, and the herby perfume that’s left makes for great flavor.

Braised Beef Cheek “Poutine” (\$14)

Traditional poutine features fries topped with gravy and rich cheese curds so rubbery they squeak when they rub against your molars. With Hickey’s version, there’s no need for the quotes. Canadian poutine shacks have been topping their fries, quote-free, with everything from sausage to guacamole for years. Hickey’s version features a lacquer of rich gravy larded with melting strands of beef cheek and velvety curds of white cheddar served over fresh-cut fries flecked with bits of crispy skin. It is the very essence of a stellar poutine.

“Tots” (\$7)

Speaking of carbs, Hickey bakes russet potatoes, cools them down in the fridge overnight and then cuts the mixture into tiny squares, deep-fries them and tosses them with a Southern-style pimento cheese



Ham Butt Steak

sauce that tastes like the best nacho-cheese dip ever. The result, which is more like a transcendent fried baked potato and nothing like a pedestrian frozen tot, is a giant cheffy middle finger to Ore-Ida.

“Ham Butt” Steak (\$23)

While it might be cheeky and a little cheap, the quotes used here are fairly appropriate. Though it looks like a slice of ham (ham is from the pig’s butt or upper-hind quarter, but confusingly is not called butt, but ham), this thick pink plank of smoky grill-marked pork is actually cut from pork shoulder, aka Boston butt, that’s been roasted, smoked for six to seven hours and then grilled. Served with a blistered red pepper, a ring of pickled pineapple and applesauce enhanced with smoked pork drippings, this was really the only real failure of the night. While I liked the brightness of the pineapple, the spice of chili and the sweetness of the applesauce, the ham butt was dry—so much so that parts of it had the chew of a tennis ball.

The bottom line

Bottlefork has its quirks and its quotation-marked menu. The dark room decorated with mini-mounted faux animal heads feels like a diminutive descendent of Rockit Bar & Grill. And yet, the food and drink here—which is created with impeccable technique and a great attention to detail—is more reminiscent of the fare you’d find at some of the city’s best restaurants. Hickey is a pro, and by partnering with Dec, Gomez and Young—dudes who know what average Joes like—they are truly on to something.

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