

eat & drink



Duck rillettes at Tete Charcuterie
HILARY HIGGINS/REDEYE PHOTOS

Meat your match

Beef up your culinary vocabulary before dining at Tete Charcuterie

By Michael Nagrant

FOR REDEYE

The chef duo behind the new West Loop restaurant Tete Charcuterie—Thomas Rice (Jean Georges in New York City, Alain Ducasse's Le Louis XV in Monte Carlo, Monaco) and Kurt Guzowski (Landmark)—don't pay much mind to that saying about too many cooks spoiling the broth. They nudge each other to make excellent charcuterie (prepared meats) daily. "We push each other until it's good," Rice said. Guzowski agreed. "We have a great camaraderie. If it tastes terrible, I'll tell him," he said. That collegial honesty is paying dividends. While their work reminds me of the kind of rustic meats you might find in tiny European butcher shops, it also has a level of refinement and balance that comes from their fine-dining experience.

Of course, great charcuterie is still a rare thing around Chicago. As such, you may not be up on all the fancy meat-curing terms. As the first Chicago restaurant to devote itself almost entirely to serving cured and prepared meats, Tete offers a great opportunity to provide a primer on charcuterie. Even if you don't know rillettes from paté, I've got you covered.

Salumi

From the Italian word for "salted meat," salumi are fresh sausages, or seasoned animal parts such as a hindquarter or shoulder, that are hung to air dry and cure. You're probably most familiar with salumi in the form of the pale pink Genovese-style salamis from American lunchmeat purveyors and that great Italian pizza staple, pepperoni. Salumi is notoriously finicky: When a true craftsman nails a good one, the rind is usually covered in fuzzy white mold, but beneath that, you'll find a magical ruddy interior filled with delicious fat, salt and flavor. Tete is working on curing its own salumi, but has to work through city approvals to sell them. Until they do, they are offering a wide selection of salumi cured by neighboring business West



Philippines sausage dish

Loop Salumi. I tried the finocchiona (\$12), which featured licorice-like fennel notes and bursts of red wine. There's a handful of other salumi, including mortadella (\$12) made with pistachio, coriander and white wine, and coppa made with pork shoulder, black pepper and bay leaf (\$12). All of the a la carte selections of meat come with warm slices of crusty bread and grainy, tangy mustard. A side of bread-and-butter pickles will cost you \$5, which felt a little pricey when I was already paying \$12 for the meat.

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Off to a good start

Paté en croute

Think spreadable meat paste, baked in a crust. You probably don't think you need meat paste in your life, but trust me, you do. Paté en croute is the Daniel Day-Lewis of charcuterie; it's a true manifestation of craft and attention to detail. To get paté en croute right, you have to bake the pastry without overcooking the meat inside. The crew at Tete achieves that balance, and does so with a holy trio of creamy foie gras, Duroc heritage breed pork and rich duck (\$29). The heaviness of the meat, which is steeped with truffle jus and duck consomme, is foiled by clusters of fruity mission figs and a touch of vinegar. My only quibble here is that the pastry crust was a little heavy; the best paté en croute has a flaky, almost puff pastry-like crust, and the one at Tete is more like a tough piece of bread. While the quality of meats was high and there was a hefty portion of foie gras in the slice, the \$29 price still felt steep.

Rillettes

The practice of charcuterie was established to keep food around in the absence of refrigeration. As such, most of the techniques mentioned here are what I like to refer to as "Little House on the Prairie" food. It was a bold pioneer who thought, "I'm gonna chop up raw meat, salt the hell out of it, cook it in fat, seal it in a crock underneath an inch of that fat and try it a few months later and hope I don't die." But someone did, and rillettes were born. Most rillettes these days are served in a flip-top glass jar with a layer of goopy fat topping that you have to dig through to get to the edible meat. Tete's rillettes (\$12) feature silky slivers of duck topped by a dice of sweet rhubarb, an assortment of tiny herbs and flowers and crispy duck skin cracklings (I'd eat a bag of these alone). While I liked the elegant presentation, this was the one dish that was underseasoned; though the garnish was bright and punchy, the duck just needed more salt.

Sausage

We're talking ground meat and fat, usually encased in a skin that's either synthetic or made from natural animal intestine. Tete offers four different sausages, including an all-beef Chicago-style hot dog. I tried the Philippines dish (\$15), which featured a longanisa, or Portuguese-influenced Filipino sausage similar to chorizo. The sausage was dense and garlicky, and mixed together with toasted crispy shrimp fried rice, a slow-poached runny egg and candied red chili marmalade,



Tete Charcuterie

it tasted like the best fried rice ever.

Fromage de tete

This is the French phrase for headcheese, which is not cheese, but rather the jellied meat made from the head of a pig. Typically, a whole hog's head is boiled in a broth or stock with spices; the result is packed in a pan, where the whole thing congeals into a loaf and is sliced like fruitcake. If you're one of the two people still reading this and thinking, "Hey, where can I get me some of that?" then you're in luck! Tete's version (\$16) isn't the wobbly, Jell-O-like consistency that many headcheeses are. It's pink cubes of luscious pork lightly held together by the natural

gelatins of the pig, spiked with vinegar and a dusting of sweet nutmeg.

Bottom line

The charcuterie at Tete is first-rate, though at times a little pricey. The service could use some work—my server did a disappearing act and wasn't familiar with all the menu items—but the quality of the food is so good that if they can bring the service up to the same level, Tete will likely go on my short list as a place to return to often.

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