

eat & drink

KATLYN MCQUAID PHOTOS FOR REDEYE

Spaetzle with mushrooms, rainbow chard, smoked beef tongue, shallots and aged gouda



A newcomer chef makes a name for himself at Bohemian House in River North

CZECH, PLEASE

By Michael Nigrant | FOR REDEYE

"This is either going to be the best or worst meal we eat this year," I told my date before we walked in to Bohemian House, a new neo-Czech restaurant in River North.

Truly, I didn't know what to expect. Though the restaurant gets its name from the fact that the Czech Republic was once part of the ancient kingdom of Bohemia, I, like most people, tend to think of the word "bohemian" as a way to describe socially unconventional folks before the word "hipster" was invented. But, even as I wiped the images of a restaurant based on the cast of "Rent" from my mind, I was still concerned that Bohemian House was sandwiched between greasy dive bar Snickers and the restaurant with maybe the second worst name ever in Chicago, American Junkie (The Money Shot, which has since closed, was No. 1).

And then there was the fact that the

chef was a relative unknown: Jimmy Papadopoulos spent the past six years working as chef de cuisine of a hotel and convention center steakhouse in Schaumburg. And he's cooking Czech food, a cuisine not typically measured in finesse or invention, but by the amount of salt, fat and carbs you can whip into it to soak up all the pilsner you're likely to slam while eating. I cast my hazy expectations aside and dug in.

Chef Jimmy, the secret weapon

When the business partners behind Bohemian House approached him, executive chef Jimmy Papadopoulos didn't know what to think either. "I almost backed out," he said. "I

was at a crossroads. I was like, this isn't my style. I'd tell my friends I was about to cook Bohemian food and they were like, 'What's that? Middle-Eastern?' " But then he started dining out at places like the venerable Czech Plaza in Berwyn to find inspiration. "I had this roasted duck that was way overcooked," he said. "But there was something exciting about the smoky duck and the contrast of the bright sweet and sour red cabbage that got me thinking about how I could reinvent things."

With his handlebar mustache, cleanly shaven head and heavily tattooed forearms, Papadopoulos looks more like a craft



beer brewer or '80s wrestling villain than a cerebral super-chef. And yet, Papadopoulos is a student of Thomas Keller's "The French Laundry Cookbook." He's memorized the techniques and stories from the book and quoted them almost verbatim when I interviewed him. Papadopoulos' enthusiasm is also infectious. When I dined, he and his sous chefs visited each table to say hi or to solicit feedback about the plates they were putting out. When I later set up an interview with him, he texted me a picture of the Stigel Family Farms pig head he'd just gotten in, over the moon about making headcheese in the same way kids freak out when the ice cream man starts jingling the bell on his cart.

Beets even the Obamas might love

Then again, enthusiasm can only take you so far. Papadopoulos is also a serious technician. Everybody in town has a beet dish these days, but few chefs roast their beets, puree them and whip them with creme fraiche to create a velvety, sweet and tangy burgundy-colored sauce that acts as a dip for expertly roasted candy-striped whole beets garnished with wood-smoked walnuts and drizzled with sticky, tangy molasses and caraway vinaigrette (\$9). The garden-like composition of the plate and the contrast of crispy and soft as well as smoky and sweet makes this the kind of dish you'd find at one of the high-end prix-fixe places in town. I suspect the Obamas, notorious beet haters, might rethink their position if they sampled this one.

Papadopoulos' spaetzle (\$16) is not the usual leaden fare you find at local German restaurants, but light puffs made with sour cream, egg and a touch of flour. It's tossed with trumpet mushrooms, rainbow chard, gray shallots and translucent shavings of beef tongue that have been seasoned with pastrami spices, smoked for six hours and brined for five days, transforming the usually tough, dense tongue meat into what tastes like a comforting, well-braised short rib. When the dish was served, my server poured a warm sauce of aged gouda tableside, transforming the plate into a kind of Czech answer to American mac 'n' cheese.

Papadopoulos' chicken paprikash (\$23) is juicy to the bone, its skin blistered and rubbed with a bit of fiery paprika. The Czech-style potato dumplings tossed with the chicken, like the spaetzle, are cloud-like and provide serious carb-y comfort. With the exception of the too-rich deviled eggs (\$6), every dish served at Bohemian House was something I'd crave again.

A savory chef with sweets skills

Bohemian House doesn't have a dedicated pastry chef, so Papadopoulos also oversees desserts including "coffee and doughnuts" (\$8), a plate of hot, sugared ricotta cheese-



Diners at
Bohemian
House



Bacon buns (clockwise from top left), chicken paprikash, spaetzle and pork schnitzel



Bohemian House
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Already hot

larded fritters served with a demitasse of espresso gelato studded with hazelnut brittle. There's also a dark chocolate custard (\$9) with a pudding-like skin and a rich, complex bitterness complimented by a dollops of sweet and salty caramel ice cream.

Are those place settings glued to the wall?

The decor is as intricate as the food, with iron- and glass-trimmed chandeliers, tufted turquoise sofas and wooden tables stenciled with silver paint. The piece de resistance, however, is table settings for 14 featuring silverware, plates and centerpieces epoxied to the wall over one of the back tables.

"Yeah, it's really cool, but I know our GM is super-nervous about it," Papadopoulos said. "Everyone's like, 'It's epoxy, it'll hold forever!' But, you know you don't want someone

getting hit in the head by a crashing plate three years from now."

Waiter, there's a sage leaf in my cocktail!

The cocktails at Bohemian House are stellar. I especially enjoyed the Bohemian Bee (\$13), featuring gin, honey and lemon juice topped with a sage leaf, a complex mix of savory, spicy sage and piney juniper. Befitting the restaurant's Czech focus, the beer list is well-curated, with plenty of crisp lagers, foamy pilsners and an especially funky Hop Nosh IPA (\$7) from one of my favorite breweries, Uinta Brewing Co. in Salt Lake City.

Bottom line

With its stellar food, beautiful interior and well-crafted cocktails, Bohemian House might just be one of the best new restaurants of 2014. Its chef, Jimmy Papadopoulos, is definitely one of the brightest new stars to arrive in Chicago in awhile.

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