

eat & drink

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MINI-REVIEW
Furious Spoon
 1571 N. Milwaukee Ave.
 773-687-8445
Already hot


**SORRY,
 NO TAKEOUT**

The name Furious Spoon is a nod to the fact that ramen really should be consumed furiously, within 10 minutes or so of service, as the ingredients and the noodles start to lose their integrity after that, Thompson said. As such, there is no takeout offered. Seats are also first come, first served.

Furious Ramen
 HILARY HIGGINS
 PHOTOS FOR REDEYE

Bowled over

CHEF SHIN THOMPSON JOINS CROWDED RAMEN SCENE WITH FURIOUS SPOON

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

Chef Shin Thompson has always seemed to be ahead of the curve. To me, his food seems as detailed and thoughtful as the work of a super-chef like Curtis Duffy of Grace, but, unlike Duffy, major success has eluded him. Bonsoiree was one of Chicago's first underground restaurants, and his next restaurant, Kabocha, was a unique attempt at fusing upscale Japanese flavor with a French brasserie spirit. "We didn't have a very clear vision [at Kabocha,]" Thompson said. "That's why I'm trying to be so focused with Furious Spoon." Unlike Kabocha or Bonsoiree, Thompson's new noodle joint in Wicker Park is almost behind the curve, following a flurry of ramen restaurants: Strings, Ajida, Ramen-san, High Five Ramen and Oiistar. I stopped in to Furious Spoon recently to see if a calculated and focused late arrival to the Japanese noodle party would pay off—or if it would be a tiny splash in an already crowded pool.

The scene: In some ways, Furious Spoon's dining room looked and felt like the inside of a sauna. Communal tables and walls are lined with rough-hewn wood coated in rainbow-colored murals, including one of a spaceman samurai wielding a blazing spoon-like ladle. Steam rose from cauldron-sized pots of broth and flowed over the counter seating. People were packed in to the narrow space so tightly

it felt like a Blue Line train during rush hour. On the other hand, it was subzero outside. The heat felt vital and reaffirming.

The broth: Even if you hate the hot room, you'll love the soup. There are four bowls on offer and they differ mainly in their flavoring and garnish. The base of each is a pork shin bone stock, which is simmered for at least 18 hours. The result is clear, lip-smacking and silky. I'd always thought the sign of a great broth is that it's so thick you almost could stand a pair of chopsticks up in it. But Thompson's broth has great body without being overbearingly thick, and that achievement is, to some extent, one of science. He uses a refractometer, a piece of equipment made especially for evaluating the viscosity of the final stock. "If you think of water as zero and a solid block as 100, we find the right measurement for a great stock is around 10," Thompson said.

The noodles: Into that broth, Thompson puts superbly springy noodles that he makes from scratch with a noodle

machine that mixes, sheets and cuts the noodle dough. The machine came from Thompson's "ramen sensei," a guy he studied with for three weeks in Japan in preparation for opening his own shop. "It cost me more to get it here than it cost me to buy," Thompson said of the machine, which was shipped from Osaka, Japan. "It weighs 800 pounds." It was definitely a worthwhile investment. Many ramen shops around town procure their noodles from California-based Sun Noodle, and while they're good, they don't quite have the chew that Thompson's do. The shoyu or soy sauce ramen (\$8.75) features a fish-sauce backnote and chewy chunks of bamboo, cha-sui (pork belly), toasted seaweed and crunchy bean sprouts. Just make sure to add in a poached egg (\$1.50) with your order. Just as addictive as the ramen is the cha-sui rice bowl (\$3.75) featuring perfectly steamed mounds of rice topped with chopped pork belly and scallions. Though the dish is simple, each grain was distinct and coated with pork gravy from the cha-sui bits.

The garnishes and sides: Thompson's grandfather owned a ramen shop in Hokkaido, Japan, during the '60s. In a nod to his love for apples, Thompson infuses the ramen broth with apples and also serves them cubed along with shimeji mushrooms, carrots and red onion in a tiny bowl of excellent sweet-and-sour pickled vegetables (\$2.25). In the house-made hot sauce, tart and sweet diced apple balances out the flame of habanero chilis. (Thompson should consider bottling the sauce, it would make a worthy competitor to much-beloved sriracha.) The hot sauce perks up the house "furious" ramen (\$11.75), a spicy miso pork broth garnished with rich beef brisket, a hearty plank of cha-sui and tender hunks of pork cheek. Alongside those rafts of protein sits a perfect runny poached egg, rice-wine marinated mushrooms and garlic relish. The combo of sweet, heat and salt was miraculous, a bowl I expect I'll return to eat many times this year.

Bottom line: You will be packed in tight. You may sweat. You will bounce to the classic hip-hop tunes served up over the dining room speakers. But, more than anything, at Furious Spoon, you'll be dining on some of the very best bowls of ramen available in Chicago.

REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.
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SOUNDS & SIPS

Old-school Biggie and Tupac battled for supremacy on the house sound system while a huge 25-ounce can of crisp Japanese Kirin lager (\$4) was wrapped in a brown paper bag and handed over clandestinely when I ordered it at the counter.