

# eat & drink

'Moscow' oysters  
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE PHOTOS



## NICE CATCH

MEET LOGAN SQUARE'S NEW SEAFOOD-FOCUSED RESTAURANT FROM THE OWNERS OF SCOFFLAW

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

**C**raft cocktail bar Scofflaw and come-as-you-are dance hall Slippery Slope are two of Logan Square's hottest watering holes. With the momentum of that success, the owners have started a restaurant group and secured a rising star chef, Cleveland native—and Food and Wine magazine best pastry chef nominee—Matt Danko, to lead the opening of seafood-centric Sink Swim, also in Logan. Clearly the Scofflaw group knows its drinks, but restaurants are a different game. Could they swim with the big fish or would they set anchor with a dining dud? I set out to find out how tight their new ship really was.

### THE SCENE

When you're hawking a nautical theme, it's tough not to go full-boat Red Lobster with the decor, but the crew behind Sink Swim has shown admirable restraint, except maybe in their use of "s" in their restaurant names. There was some thick sea cable-style rope hanging from the ceiling, and some salty dog sea captain portraits on the walls, but overall there was very little kitsch. It felt less like a Disney "Little Mermaid" set-piece and more like a mod, chill hang with calming white-washed walls. The globe lights made of

white hexagonal glass panes, the Tiffany-blue banquettes, the light wood tables topped with tiny planters outfitted with succulent plants, and the floating blaze-orange fireplace located near the foyer give it almost a Danish ski-lodge vibe.

### THE SEAFOOD

While the dining room is comfy and muted, and the menu prices eminently affordable (nothing is more than \$20), that casualness belies the high-end gourmet talents of its executive chef. Danko, a former art teacher

who trained at venerable Cleveland spots like Greenhouse Tavern and Trentina, is a blazing new Chicago talent. His style, which is a smart, punchy flavor-forward reimagination of classic dishes, reminds me of the incredible work Jason Vincent was doing at Nightwood before he left. This link is appropriate, as Vincent, who too is a Cleveland native, introduced Danko to the Scofflaw group.

A dish that most exemplified Danko's style is his shrimp toast tea sandwich (\$9), a Chinese dim sum staple that's often a milquetoast mix of rubbery shrimp and canned water chestnuts. Danko's version, more of an open-face sandwich, features buttery brioche triangles smeared with a velvety puree of shrimp and spicy nduja, a spreadable Italian pork sausage. It gets its crunch not from water chestnuts, but a spring bounty of crisp radish and curls of bitter frisée lettuce. Each element popped off with flavor in rapid succession like a fireworks grand finale. When it comes to oysters, I'm a purist, at most only adding a spritz of lemon or a drop of mignonette. But Danko serves

them up Moscow-style (\$7.25 each) with a dollop of creme fraiche and a pinch of caviar, a preparation I'll now crave with every platter of oysters I may order.

Danko's monkfish liver torchon (\$12) is a seafaring analogue to a foie gras terrine, featuring fish liver spiced with cardamom, Thai long pepper and orange zest. Monkfish liver is not quite as buttery as foie gras, but when paired with onion bechamel and bursting pickled grapes, it was somehow greater than the best duck liver pates I have loved.

There was also a celery root soup (\$12) drizzled with squid ink and filled with smoked clams and oysters and smoked paprika-dusted potatoes. It tasted like a rich man's clam chowder. My only quibble is it could have had some brightening citrus added to cut through the richness.

Amidst this brilliance, there was really only one dud, a ring of warm smoked trout (\$16) blanketed in gloppy bagna cauda, an aioli-like sauce. The creamy mess felt like eating canned tuna enrobed in microwaved Miracle Whip.

#### Sink Swim

3213 W. Armitage Ave.  
773-486-7465



Off to a good start



Not everything here is from the sea. Danko's beef and broccoli (\$20) featuring seared, rare hanger steak, crisp cabbage wedges and charred florets of broccoli on a dish painted with a swoosh of chili and soy sauce-spiked fermented black bean paste was a brilliant riff on the Chinese take-out staple. "That's one of the great things about this opportunity," Danko said. "I was given a lot of freedom with the menu. Even though the restaurant is seafood-focused, I wasn't put in a box. I was able to break out some old ideas, ideas I couldn't do because I previously worked in a French bistro and an Italian restaurant and bring them to life here."

## THE SWEETS

While he was in Cleveland, Danko spent a lot of time as a pastry chef, so I wasn't surprised to see that he handles those duties at Sink Swim as well. One of the most imaginative and tastiest desserts I've experienced this year, a beautiful mix of sweet, bitter and fruity flavors, was Danko's moist pound cake (\$8) infused with grated pecorino cheese tossed with dehydrated grapefruit marinated in Cappelletti (an Italian aperitif that's more aromatic and sweeter than, but similar to Campari) topped with whipped honey custard, pistachios and olive oil.

## THE SERVICE

My server noticed we barely touched the warm smoked trout and inquired as to whether we enjoyed it. She took notes on our feedback and said she'd share it with the kitchen, and then comped the price of the dish on the bill, unbidden. When I asked her about an ingredient I didn't recognize, garum, one of the options the restaurant offers as an oyster topper, she waxed rhapsodic about it being a fermented fish sauce used by Roman emperors. Though I'd visited in the first week of operation, this was an impressive display of knowledge and responsiveness I don't often see in restaurants that have been open for months.

## BOTTOM LINE

Sink Swim might seem like a casual neighborhood restaurant, but Danko's dishes are incredibly complex, interesting and destination-worthy. It feels like a marriage of the clean, precise flavors of Nightwood in Pilsen and the modern seafood stylings of GT Fish & Oyster in River North, a heavenly pairing that means the restaurant does not sink and most definitely swims with Michael Phelps-like aplomb.

REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.  
REDEYE@REDEYECHICAGO.COM | @REDEYEEATDRINK



The bar at Sink Swim



Warm smoked trout



Beef and broccoli with a 114 Old Fashioned cocktail



Monkfish liver torchon

jam presents

THE LONGER THAN SIX SECONDS TOUR

TANNER PATRICK ANDREW BAZZI RAJIV DHALL

TONIGHT!  
FRIDAY, APRIL 17  
SUBTERRANEAN  
2011 WEST NORTH AVENUE  
6:30PM / ALL AGES

RHIANNON GIDDENS

FOUNDING MEMBER OF SUPERGROUP NEW BASEMENT TAPES AND CAROLINA CHOCOLATE DROPS

WITH SPECIAL GUEST BHI BHIMAN

THIS THURSDAY!  
APRIL 23  
8PM - 10 - OVER  
VIC THEATRE 3145 N. SHEFFIELD

KIDS IN THE HALL

MAY 14  
8PM - 10 - OVER  
VIC THEATRE 3145 N. SHEFFIELD

ON SALE TODAY AT NOON!

BUY TICKETS AT JAMUSA.COM