

eat & drink

Yum's SUM

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

The Chinese phrase dim sum translates to “touch the heart” in English. It’s an apt descriptor for a cuisine that, when executed correctly, feels like a comforting family dinner party. But Chicago is not San Francisco, where there are so many good dumplings you almost expect the corner gas station to serve a mean barbecue bao. Many places in Chinatown and beyond serve stuff that’s been moldering away inside a bamboo basket for hours waiting for your order, or they dole out reheated pre-frozen dumplings with glutinous skins so thick you feel like you’re chewing on a tire with each bite.

Really, the only dim sum house I ever truly loved in Chicago was the defunct Shui Wah, purveyor of diaphanous dumplings and salt-and-pepper squid fries so addictive I called them calamari crack. Since Shui Wah closed, I’ve been longing for a replacement. In a pinch, the stalwart Phoenix dim sum in Chinatown has been a regular stop. So it makes sense that I’ve finally found a proper replacement for Shui Wah in the Loop dim sum parlor Yum Cha, a joint venture between the owners of Phoenix and managing chef/partner Rodelio “Food Buddha” Aglibot (probably best known as the opening chef of Rockit Ranch’s pan-Asian-skewing Sunda back in March 2009).

Traditional dim sum parlor decor is usually a smattering of glittery googly-eyed waving cats, paper lanterns and cheap shoji screens (which, ironically, like the fortune cookie, were invented in Japan). Yum Cha—lacquered in glossy blacks, swaddled in red and brown leathers and outfitted with sweeping white orchid-like chandeliers—feels like the kind of elegant lair where James Bond would feel comfortable getting his dim sum on. Pendant lanterns hang over the bar, but instead of cheap collapsible orbs they’re sleek custom-made bamboo ones. There’s also a nod to the shoji screen in a backlit divider that separates the front dining room from the back, but it’s quite elegant and provides a backdrop for a collection of vintage tea-



Yum Cha

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WORTH A TRIP

DIM SUM at YUM CHA

330 E. Randolph St. 312-946-8885

kettles.

The dim sum created by Aglibot is similarly refined. Classic dim sum dishes such as char sui bao (barbecue pork buns, \$4.95), har gow (scallop-shaped steamed shrimp dumplings, \$5.95) and sui mai (pork dumplings, \$5.95, more commonly called shu mai) abound. But that sui mai is topped with caviar, and the barbecue buns are pillowy and loaded with star anise-perfumed pork. The har gow, often the tirelike chewy culprit I mentioned earlier, are thin-skinned and melted on my tongue. And while there are plenty of luxurious twists on classics, Aglibot’s real skill is launching innovative, completely new offerings to the dim sum canon, such as silky braised oxtail-stuffed potstickers (\$8.95) dripping in a sweet and spicy honey-ginger jus. My favorite innovation of his is thin slivers of octopus (\$12.95) gently simmered

in oil studded with cinnamon, szechuan peppercorn, star anise and ginger. The tender octopus is tossed with snappy green beans, fried shallots and mesmerizing salty fried doughnutlike daikon radish cakes glazed in chili sauce. “I almost didn’t put that on the menu. Octopus isn’t really a Chinese ingredient, but lots of people in Chicago eat octopus because of the Greek influence, so I said, ‘What the heck, I’m gonna go for it,’” Aglibot said.

Those fried daikon cakes also make an appearance in another dish as a crouton that, along with crispy fried duck skin, offers a crunchy counterpoint to delicate slivers of roasted duck and frilly frisée lettuce leaves tossed with the yolk of a freshly breached poached egg (\$11.95). It’s like a dim sum riff on the French lyonnaise salad. “If they could, chefs would pretty much eat everything



Foie gras egg custard tarts

dripping in egg yolk. This is a nod to that,” Aglibot said. I’m not a chef, but I agree: A rich, coating egg yolk like this is the perfect finishing touch.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED, AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.