

# eat & drink

# CASUAL Spin



**Bahn Mi mini tacos**  
PHOTOS BY KAITLYN MCQUAID FOR REDEYE

## Baocos puts a casual spin on fusion flavors in Logan Square

By Michael Nigrant | FOR REDEYE

**I**t's not every day you get a chance to dine at a Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, American and Mexican restaurant. But Baocos—a new fast-casual concept launched by longtime Chicago-area Melting Pot franchise owner Ervin Emery—does just that, serving up Philly cheesesteaks, cheeseburgers, crab cakes, pork belly and more, all stuffed into mini taco shells or Asian buns called bao. Fusion can be fabulous, but it's often a recipe for confusion. I stopped in recently to figure out which version of fusion was being served.

### The scene

If you're sad about the impending end of summer, you might perk up after a visit to Baocos. The neon orange and green color scheme looked like it was modeled after the liquid from a Gatorade bottle. The dining room was so bright it was tough not to smile and feel upbeat.

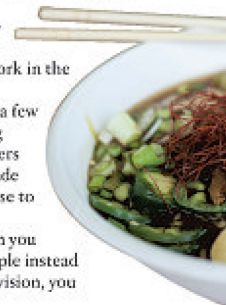
There's a bunch of big mod silver pendant lamps hanging from the ceiling and a bit of reclaimed wood lining the divider between the kitchen and dining room. "I wanted it to have a natural feel, but I didn't want the space to feel rustic and dark. I wanted it to have some energy and be modern," Emery said.

### The food

Baocos is clearly meant as a launchpad for future franchising. As such, this original location is sort of a testing ground for what will work in the future.

Emery said they did a few rounds of menu testing with potential consumers before opening and made many tweaks in response to those panels.

The problem is when you consult a bunch of people instead of following your own vision, you



usually get a lot more answers than you need. The menu here is almost overwhelming. There are chips and dip, salads, noodles, bao, tacos, bowls and burritos on offer. It feels like Baocos is trying to eventually compete with Chipotle, Taco Bell, Panda Express, local ramen shacks and Popeyes chicken. I think Emery and his crew will need to narrow their focus if they're going to be successful long-term. Still, Emery said the byproduct of having so many options is that "we have had a lot of repeat customers and instead of sticking with one thing, they're trying all kinds of things and telling us they're all great."

Some of it is great. Though the concept is fast-casual, the quality of ingredients is very high, something you can taste. All of the steak is top sirloin. The pico de gallo is chopped fresh in-house.

All meats are slow rotisserie roasted. The crispy burrito tortillas, springy bao and crackling tacos are all made from fresh dough in-house. The tiny tortillas used on the mini tacos are so good, they could be the foundation for a stand that only sells micro-tacos.

My absolute favorite thing at Baocos was the "Bacon Chee Burger" (\$9 for five mini-tacos), featuring one of those corn shells filled with ground juicy sirloin, bacon, chihuahua cheese, slivers of dill pickle and tomato, a sprinkling of iceberg lettuce, grilled onion and swooshes of ketchup and mustard. It tasted like a line cook at Taco Bell ordered takeout from Small Cheval and dropped the burger into one of Taco Bell's yellow shells, which is to say it's brilliant stoner food.

Philly bao (\$8 for three), steak or chicken (I tried steak) topped with golden caramelized onions and grill-marked peppers dripping with white American cheese (it has changed to the more authentic Cheez Whiz since I dined) was a killer mash-up of a cheesesteak and an Asian dumpling. The only quibble here is that a thick plank of sirloin, rather than the wispy curls of meat used, would stand up better to the substantial bao bun.

The house-made supaishi ramen (\$12) was filled with thick

cuts of pork belly, nicely acidic pickled okra, crisp scallions, spicy carrots and a spoonful of coarse-grained mustard that cut through the richness of the meat. But the soft-boiled egg teetered on the edge of hardboiled and wasn't as satisfying as the runny poached eggs I prefer with my ramen. The broth, which is vegetable-based and fortified with miso, was well seasoned but not as substantial or rewarding as a collagen-infused pork broth.

A crab cake bao (three for \$8) suffered a similar fate as the Philly cheesesteak bao: The inconsequential slivers of crabmeat got lost in the folds of the thick bun. A drizzle of chipotle mayo and a salad of crisp cilantro and scallions lightened the load a touch, but this sandwich needed a healthy dose of lemon to bump up the flavor.

The shell on the grill-pressed housemade Creole burrito (\$8.99) was universally crispy, but the rice "jambalaya" inside was mushy and made up about 75 percent of the filler. Great jambalaya has deep roasted tomatoes and cayenne flavors. The rice in this burrito was bland and steamed.

### Dessert

Freshly fried doughnuts soaked with honey-Sriracha, AKA Baoboloni (three for \$4), reminded me of a spicy delightful riff on Indian gulab jamun. The only problem is one of the three donuts was slightly raw at the center.

### Service

The cashier working the counter was super friendly and a good guide to the expansive menu. He also served as my food runner and brought an extra pair of chopsticks and some napkins when we asked where we could find them.

### Bottom line

Baocos' Asian-Latin flavor profile is a refreshing approach to the fast-casual, Chipotle-like sector of dining, but in order to pull it off better, the owners should tighten up the menu offerings and kill off the Creole influences. This flagship location is next to Belly Shack, a restaurant that seamlessly melds Puerto Rican and Asian flavors with smartly contrasting textures and bright acid and citrus-brightened flavors. For now, I'm spending my money next door at Belly Shack.

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The scene at Baocos



Bacon Chee Burger



Crispy Mochi



Supaishi Ramen

RATINGS KEY ★★★★★ DEAD UPON ARRIVAL ★★★★★ PROCEED WITH CAUTION ★★★★★ GIVE IT SOME TIME ★★★★★ TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT ★★★★★ OFF TO A GOOD START ★★★★★ HEATING UP ★★★★★ ALREADY HOT