



Cold combo

winter sucks

OYSTER BAH IN LINCOLN PARK IS A GREAT CATCH

Hooked

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

The common image of a food critic is a bitter, vindictive, monocle-wearing bon vivant, aka Anton Ego of “Ratatouille.” The truth is I eat far too many cups of instant noodles to be considered a bon vivant. I want every restaurant I try to be worthy of four stars. Who wants to suffer through a terrible meal, even if you’re getting paid for it?

Still, I have to admit that when I heard about Oyster Bah, a new Lincoln Park restaurant from Lettuce Entertain You, I had fantasies of it being subpar so I could title this piece “Oyster Bah, Humbug.” Needless to say, Lettuce founder Richard Melman, managing partner Bill Nevruz and chef Pete Balodimas didn’t go along with my plan. Instead, they’ve delivered quite the seafood restaurant.

The scene

The interior of Oyster Bah feels like Red Lobster reimagined by hipsters, which is to say there’s lots of nautical bric-a-brac: lobster pots, buoys, mounted trophy fish and old boat propellers. There’s also weathered wood throughout and a porthole-clad entrance. Surprisingly, the whole scheme doesn’t feel

like a cheesy Long John Silver’s offshoot.

The bar and some of the tables are marble-topped, while all of the tables have a mismatched assortment of used and worn chairs. There’s a cozy second concept called the Crab Cellar in the basement that serves a few different options that aren’t on the upstairs menu, such as a full order of red king crab (\$49.95). Though it’s open on a first-come, first-serve basis, the Crab Cellar, which was previously an old prep kitchen, feels hidden and clandestine, similar to The Office at The Aviary.

Balodimas attributes the overall quality of the dining room to Melman. “I’ve opened 18 restaurants, but this is the first with Lettuce. A week before opening, we’re tearing down walls, painting and repainting walls,” he said.

“It seems like madness, but then you realize it makes a huge difference. Rich [Melman] knows what works. He’s the best in the business. When it all comes together, it’s perfect. The place feels like it’s been here 20 years, not like we launched yesterday.”

The food

With ice-packed seafood platters, crab cakes, a huge assortment of East and West Coast oysters, fish and chips and more, the menu seems to complement the decor at first glance. But that’s a little misleading. Balodimas is a talented chef who’s constructing his dishes with painstaking techniques and modern twists.

Consider the cold combo (\$18.95 per person), a seafood platter featuring sweet Spring Creek Oysters from Massachusetts, tiny bites of buttery king crab and crisp and briny little neck clams. It’s served with typical dips like a horseradish-spiked cocktail sauce and velvety smooth mustard-infused aioli, but there’s also an interesting Guinness stout granita included, which offers a

refreshing splash of chocolate, coffee and vinegar to the pristine shellfish.

The crispy snapper (\$27.95) is smothered in sauce made of pureed red Fresno chilis braised in olive oil spiked with Thai chilis, palm sugar, lime juice, cilantro, mint, ginger and soy. It’s fiery and bright, but the heat isn’t palate blowing. Though the meat is served on the bone and looks like a whole fish, the non-sauced side has been removed and used to make fish tacos (\$16.95). This keeps the price down and still allows Balodimas to serve a juicy fillet on the bone. Piled underneath the snapper are crisp Kennebec french fries, which are the result of a painstaking five-day process of rinsing, brining, soaking, flash frying, drying and frying again.

Balodimas doesn’t always take the long and hard road. His crab cake (\$15.95) features fresh hand-picked crab meat (which he says “has a bunch of juicy fatty bits” left in), a little cracker meal and Old Bay seasoning. The result is a hefty but simple cake with punchy flavor and little filler. While I loved the crab cake, I encountered a bit

MINI-REVIEW
Oyster Bah
 1962 N. Halsted St.
 773-248-3000
 ★★★★★
 Heating up

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



Clams, lobster and oysters at Oyster Bah



of inedible chewy cartilage. “Yeah, we’ve had a few complaints about that. I don’t want to minimize the guest’s concern. That’s important,” Balodimas said. “But, and maybe this is the chef in me talking, I would rather have the guest complain because of the by-product of having a fresh, flavorful product like the one we’re using than have a crab cake that’s dry and mealy.”

The swordfish schnitzel (\$20.95), which has since been taken off the menu, is also a departure from the usual. I was imagining a crispy, heavily breaded crust that you’d find with the traditional German preparation. Balodimas said he tried it that way but the crust overwhelmed the flavor of the fish. He regrouped and created a lighter crust. The swordfish’s

meatiness shone through, and I appreciated that, but the crust reminded me a bit of a battered potato pancake, which I wasn’t expecting.

Shrimp tempura (\$14.95) was also innovative. Instead of curled or butterflyed hunks of panko-studded meat, Balodimas and his team score the belly so the flesh, which is enrobed in a puffy tubular batter shape that reminds me of a mini corn dog, straightens out and cooks to a more tender consistency. The salty, spicy ginger-soy dipping sauce is also a nice antidote to all the aioli and cocktail sauce I’ve already encountered. My only quibble: A couple of the shrimp had a slightly soggy batter.

The drinks

All of the cocktails have nautical-themed names: The Cape, Nor’Easter and Oyster’s Bloody. The Perfect Storm (\$11) is a riff on a dark and stormy that adds falernum to the traditional mix of rum, ginger beer and lime. This addition lends a perfume of allspice, clove and vanilla, which makes the brew a bit headier. The Nor’Easter (\$12) features rye spiked with maple syrup, ginger beer, lime and the woody notes of cocktail bitters, a sweet and punchy mix that was the best of the drinks that I tried. Though I did not order wine, the list offers dozens of by-the-glass pours and is studded with nice oyster-friendly blends.

Dessert

My dining companion and I took bets as to whether or not there would be key lime pie on the dessert menu. I was kind of delighted that Balodimas and his crew left it off in favor of a perfect sugar-crusted slice of pie brimming with jammy blueberries and a monsoon-moist wedge of coconut cake (\$7.95 each).

Service

I don’t think I’ve ever had my water glass so well stocked. It felt like the service staff ran over and topped me off after every sip. Food arrived quickly, and servers cleared plates only after they confirmed we’d actually finished—something that happens less and less these days. Though Oyster Bah is a casual spot, there was a general level of attentiveness here that I rarely find at much higher priced fine-dining restaurants in Chicago.

Bottom line

Oyster Bah is fairly unique. It feels like a casual fish shack but sells pristine seafood prepared with impeccable technique at reasonable prices. Oyster Bah is a classic, one that will likely join the pantheon of other long-lived Lettuce spots such as Cafe Ba-Ba-Reeba and Mon Ami Gabi.

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



How to eat an oyster



THE PICKUP

Pick up the oyster with the smooth edge facing you, keeping it flat as to not spill the juice.



THE TIP-OFF

Tip it back and slurp.



THE CHEW

Chew a few times and swallow.



OPTIONAL

Dress up your oyster with a squeeze of lemon, a dash of cocktail or hot sauce or mignonette. Some like eating them on or with a saltine cracker.

Though some use the tiny fork provided to ensure the meat is fully detached from the shell, that shouldn’t be necessary at any restaurant with a decent shucker. REDEYE