

winter sucks

Duck gumbo soup
at Spotted Monkey

Monkey business

From the owner of Saucy Porka, Spotted Monkey ups your lunch game in the Loop





By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

Some believe that critics criticize because they can't do. In my particular case, when I've been less than enthusiastic about certain restaurants, it's been said I couldn't cook my way out of a paper bag. I like to believe this isn't true. I got into food writing through my love of cooking. I also spend a lot of time constructing restaurants in my head that I one day hope to launch. That's why I find Amy Le—owner and chef of Spotted Monkey, a new Asian-Latin fusion restaurant in Chicago's financial district—so inspiring.

She wasn't a food critic, but for almost seven years, Le worked as a journalist, including a stint as a general reporter for the Chicago Sun-Times. She also was a social media manager for GrubHub. Eventually, she reinvented herself by launching Duck N Roll, one of Chicago's early food trucks. "My family had restaurants, and I grew up in the business. But you go to college and you try to get away from the family business," Le said. "I studied journalism, but I still found myself working in restaurants, catering and cooking for friends. It was always something I loved to do."

In 2013, Le opened Saucy Porka in the financial district (she's still a partner) with Rafael Lopez, formerly of Wagyu Wagon. Saucy Porka focuses on Asian and Puerto Rican influences, but at Spotted Monkey, Le wanted to mine more Latin flavors, including those from Mexico, Cuba and Guatemala, with her business partner John Keebler and executive chef Omar Carrillo. I stopped in recently to see if the Monkey was just as saucy as the Porka.

THE SCENE

Spotted Monkey's website touts that the interior is "decorated with the nostalgia of 1950s and '60s Havana, Cuba." With that in mind, I expected to see pictures of young Fidel Castro leading a revolution or maybe the grille of a '57 Chevy mounted on the wall. What I got instead was pedestrian restaurant-grade tables, gray paint and a funky marquee-like Spotted Monkey signage on one wall. It was clean, inviting and warm.

THE FOOD

Picadillo egg rolls (\$1.85) are dappled with fry oil. The thick wrappers crunch, while innards of cumin-spiced tender beef burst with sweet notes of raisin.

Duck gumbo soup (\$5 for half, \$9 large) features silky shards of star anise-flavored roast duck, toothsome kidney beans and hunks of chorizo, a bowl that conjures both the Bayou and Beijing. "I had a roommate from New Orleans who always complained that they couldn't find good gumbo in Chicago, so I created the dish when I started the

Duck N Roll food truck," Le said. "People were always asking about it, and I knew that I'd bring it back."

The phozole (\$4.70 for half, \$8.75 large), a mashup of Vietnamese pho and Mexican pozole, exploded with notes of cinnamon, clove and spicy red chili. It could have used a touch more salt, and while this is a personal preference, it only had noodles, not the satisfying chewy bits of hominy you find in a good pozole.

A banh mi with tender duck confit (\$11.50), pickled vegetables and a drizzle of rich, salty plum sauce aioli was nestled in a crackling French bread bun.

Ropa vieja (\$10.50)—braised beef served over jasmine rice and topped with fizzy, fiery bits of kimchi—wafted a heady coconut scent. Like the phozole, this too could have used more salt. The menu also promised a chili citrus sauce, which I couldn't detect.

Le and her crew also serve up an assortment of bacos (\$2.75-\$3.75). These aren't the vegan-friendly bacon bits from Betty Crocker, but instead, a fusion of bao (Asian dumplings) and tacos. David Chang of the Momofuku empire, who conquered the world with his pork belly-stuffed bao, launched this trend a few years ago. Le takes it a step further, stuffing hers with red chili-slathered pork topped with a sweet pineapple salsa (\$2.75), creating a bao al pastor of sorts that's pretty killer. Another bao stuffed with shrimp and corn salsa (\$3.50), however, was a touch bland and, like the phozole and ropa vieja, needed a bit more salt.

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

THE DRINKS

Vietnamese coffee (\$2.75) is thick with condensed milk and spiked with cinnamon. Lemonade (\$3.75) is infused with a winter-green kiss of mint-flavored simple syrup, pineapple juice and fizzy soda.

THE SERVICE

The counter staff knows most people don't have a reference point for Asian-Latin fusion. But you don't have time to furrow your brow and wonder if phozole is some kind of Muppet-based dish, because some super-nice employee is already professing the wonders of its pho-like comforts and warming chili spice. When your order is delivered to the table, there's no slapdash drop-off, but a full-service restaurant accounting of ingredients, dish names and cooking techniques used to make the food.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Many dishes, like the picadillo egg rolls and duck banh mi, are destination-worthy. Others need a touch more seasoning. What's indisputable is that if you're working in the financial district or visiting the Sears, er, Willis Tower Skydeck, Spotted Monkey is a great place to fuel up.

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