

# eat & drink

**MINI-REVIEW**  
**Packed:**  
**Dumplings**  
**Reimagined**  
1321 E. 57th St.  
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★☆☆☆☆  
Proceed with caution



# PACK A PUNCH

## How does Hyde Park's new dumpling shop stack up?

By Michael Nigrant | FOR REDEYE

The irony of expensive prix-fixe meals is that the plates are often so dainty and precious that sometimes people have to stop for fast food afterward just to feel full and satisfied. Packed: Dumplings Reimagined from partners Aaron DiMaria (RA Sushi) and chef Mike Sheerin (Blackbird, Cicchetti, currently chef at Embeya) isn't a prix-fixe experience; it's a casual quick-service dumpling shop in Hyde Park. Still, after a recent visit there, I ended my night chowing down on McDonald's Chicken McNuggets and a cherry Coke Slurpee from 7-Eleven.



Mac 'n' cheese



Pastrami

**THE SCENE**

Everything at Packed, including the student- and professor-studded crowd from neighboring University of Chicago, is basically non-GMO, eco-friendly and compostable. The walls are slicked with a shade of mint green, the kind of noncommittal color you might paint a nursery if you decided not to find out your child's gender before birth. Artistic touches include a handful of large photos of cows grazing, hay bales and flowers, something Monet might have done were he to try his hand at digital photography. Utensils from an eco-conscious South Asian company are made from compressed and steam-treated fallen palm fronds.

**THE SERVICE**

Though Packed is supposed to be quick service, I waited in line like cattle (or people clamoring for lunch at Chipotle back in its heyday) in a narrow hallway to place my order. I waited again for my order to dribble out dumpling by dumpling. Though I had a nifty lacquered log with a number mounted on it to alert the service staff where to deliver my meal, a food runner with a plate of noodles asked me if my name was Fred and if the noodles were mine. They were not.

**THE FOOD**

Chef Sheerin is mighty talented and known for bringing modern techniques to classic dishes, a style that earned him a Food & Wine magazine Best New Chef nod in 2010. Blackbird, which was already a standard bearer for Chicago culinary excellence, improved under his lead. Though short-lived, Cicchetti brought red-sauce cuisine to the 21st century, serving aged beef carpaccio showered with dehydrated cauliflower slices that ate like fine potato chips.

These bones are evident at Packed. The "American" cheese on the mac 'n' cheese (\$7) dish isn't Velveeta but a creamy, heartwarming mix of Hook's 4-year cheddar and grass-fed cream cheese. The meat in the pastrami dumpling (two for \$5, five for \$11.50) is house-cured. A dip served with hushpuppies (\$7) features gelled coconut milk infused with lime and rosemary. The butternut squash dumpling (two for \$4, five for \$9) plate is painted with a balsamic caramel so silky I wish Garrett Popcorn would drizzle it over a new Italian-Chicago mix. The dumpling wrappers are lithe and made by hand.

But a third of the dumplings I tried were raw at the seams. The hushpuppies were crunchy, golden brown and packed with grassy shishito pepper bits, but a finishing dash of salt was woefully missing. The mac 'n' cheese features toothy housemade noodles, but the cheese sauce was grainy, and dehydrated shiitakes tossed into the mix were desiccated and too crunchy. The whole thing was overdressed with thick jalapeno rounds where a smattering of tiny pepper bits would improve the overall balance and texture of the dish.

The pastrami dumpling burst with peppery spice and had the essence of a good deli sandwich. Pickled tomato sprinkled around the dumpling provided a zingy swoosh of acidity that cut through the richness of the meat. But the butternut squash dumpling, plated on pureed squash, reminded me of a Gerber baby food giveaway, an unreleased Bob Dylan album called "Mush on Mush." The puree included lady apples, which, had they been cubed in the mix, might have created a more pleasing textural contrast.

When I visited, Packed had been open just over a week, and Sheerin, who's still running the kitchen at Embeya at night, is only

available for quality control during morning prep. He's relying on a newly trained group of cooks who are preparing thousands of dumplings daily in a tiny kitchen. Flavor combinations are thoughtful, and proteins in the dumplings are well-executed. If the staff can iron out the kinks on seasoning and wrapper-steaming, Packed might turn out to be the most innovative and excellent dumpling house in the city.

**THE DRINKS**

The only drinks available when I visited were tap water, an excellent Sparrow nitrogen-infused iced coffee (\$4), which finished with fruity notes, and raspberry-kissed Nicaraguan tea (\$4). The Packed crew expected to offer a couple of juices from Harvest Juicery but ran into cost issues during opening week.

**THE VALUE**

I normally over-order when I dine out so I can try a deep selection of the menu. I thought I was being aggressive at Packed, but the order, which cost \$70.72, left four of us underfed, leading to my McNugget-Slurpee run.

**BOTTOM LINE**

Packed's dumpling wrappers are housemade and the flavor combinations are stellar, but there were some seasoning, cooking and general execution issues evident when I visited. Stop by if you live near Hyde Park; if not, wait a little longer while Sheerin and his team have a chance to make adjustments.

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

**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

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