

## eat &amp; drink



Seafood charcuterie  
at Snaggletooth  
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE

By Michael Nagrant | REDEYE

You don't know lox. What you might know of cured salmon, if anything at all, is that sad vacuum-packed orange mush tucked away in the refrigerated section of your neighborhood grocery store. Jennifer Kim (Blackbird, Nico Osteria) and Bill Montagne (C Chicago), owners and partners at Snaggletooth, a tiny new restaurant in Lakeview, don't sell mush. They purvey the real deal: delicately spiced, heavenly thin, sustainably fished, super-fresh cured fish. It's a rare and addictive addition to Chicago's deli scene.

In curing fish, salts and spices are typically rubbed directly onto the fish's flesh. The outer layer dries out and forms a tough exterior called a pellicle. Once the fish is cured, the spices are washed off and the flavor—like an itchy-bitsy spider—goes down the water-spout. Added moisture from the wash, in my opinion, creates that mushy consistency.

With Montagne's technique, the fish is wrapped in cheesecloth and the spice cure is applied directly to the cloth. It still seasons the fish, but instead of having to be washed away after curing, the cloth is simply removed. The cure also includes a dash of liquor. As water leaves the fish during the curing process, the fish picks up extra flavor

## Seafood charcuterie

\$14 at Snaggletooth, 2819 N. Southport Ave. 773-899-4711

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and moisture from the alcohol and stays firm and lustrous.

There are lots of ways to sample the end result of Montagne's cure, but none better than the seafood charcuterie plate. What you'll get is four kinds of fish, matzo crackers, pickled grainy mustard that eats like caviar and small dollops of raspberry-rose jam made by one of Montagne's friends. It's almost slanderous to refer to the crusty but moist cracker served on this plate as "matzo." When you think of matzo, you probably imagine the god-awful, mouth-drying stuff from Manischewitz. But Montagne and Kim's recipe replaces water with olive oil. The matzo is golden brown and, when I visited, still warm from the oven.

The fish selection can change daily, but my plate included pastrami trout, lime hamachi, jasmine tea-cured trout and basic trout lox. The fish is cut into translucent scrims, making the jasmine trout look like stained glass, a candy-cane swirl of pink and milky fat ridges. Slightly oily, it had the mouthfeel of prosciutto

and the astringent herbal essence of a fine tea. The pearl-white hamachi was cut thick like a slab of premium sashimi, and each bite wafted with lime like an island cocktail. The trout pastrami was peppery with a delicate flesh more refined than its beef counterpart. Dabbles of jam tasted just like dewy raspberries plucked straight from a bush, something I often did as a kid in my grandmother's backyard.

In addition to fish, there are also bagels from New York Bagel & Bialy and housemade "schmears" made not with cream cheese, but with a tangy, lighter Greek yogurt base infused with tomato conserva or spicy kimchi. There's fine Georgia peach rooibos tea from Rare Tea Cellar and perfectly acidic, bright coffee from Sparrow Coffee Roastery.

Montagne and Kim, both veterans of heavy-hitting restaurants, said Snaggletooth is an attempt to scale down, connect with people again and control everything they do.

The space, which features tiny plants growing in old oyster shells, a cork-lined

coffee table, white molded plastic chairs and a reclaimed wood pallet stuffed with succulents and mosses, looks like a Pinterest board curated by the hippest of mid-century modernists. A stairwell leading to the upper dining room is lined with art from Kim's apartment, including a David Bowie paper doll. "My mom was in a group. They were these five Korean ladies who toured around and covered Bowie," Kim said. "This stuff reminds me of that."

Though neither Kim nor Montagne is Jewish, they refer to Snaggletooth as a deli—not in the traditional sense but as a gathering place, a neighborhood touchstone.

"There's this guy who's been coming in before we even opened. Then he didn't come in for three days," Montagne said. "When he came back, we joked and told him we worried about him because he'd been gone for so long. That's what this is all about. This place is small enough so that we can really connect with people and nurture and feed them. And that's why we got into cooking in the first place."

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