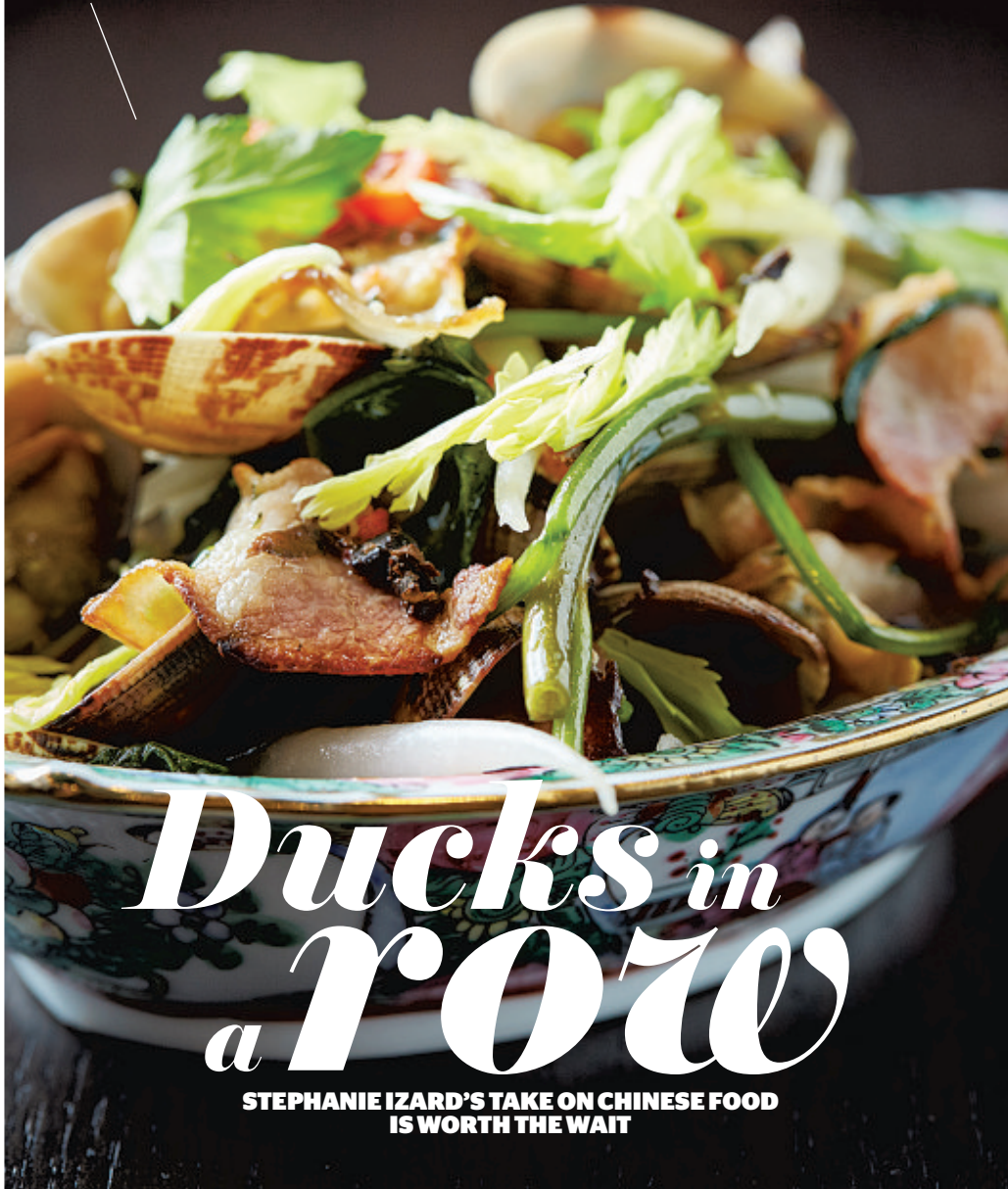


eat & drink

Duck Duck Goat
857 W. Fulton Market
312-902-3825
★★★★☆
Off to a good start

Seafood fried rice



Ducks in a Row

STEPHANIE IZARD'S TAKE ON CHINESE FOOD IS WORTH THE WAIT

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

"I thought it was normal for your mom to make Mandarin pancakes when you were growing up. It was only later I realized nobody was doing that," said Stephanie Izard, chef and partner behind West Loop's new Duck Duck Goat.

Armed with childhood memories of cooking Chinese food alongside her mother and recent travels to China, Izard teamed up with Boka Restaurant Group principals Rob Katz and Kevin Boehm for her third restaurant, a gourmet take on Chinese cuisine in Chicago.

I stopped in recently to see if her efforts could satisfy General Tso's army or if they'd leave me yearning for P.F. Chang's orange peel shrimp.

Indiana Jones and the Temple of Goat

Entering the Duck Duck Goat dining room feels like parachuting into a Steven Spielberg set or, more specifically, Spielberg's idea of 1930s Shanghai in "Indiana Jones and

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 Temple of Doom." The beige and red room is filled with woven-back, honey-colored banquettes and a bunch of tchotchkes including vintage electric fans. The room is meant to evoke a place where China-town workers might take a break or play a spirited game of mahjong.

Another red room is dotted with tasseled lanterns, gold-trimmed tables, handsome tufted stools and lush flowered drapes. There's also a tearoom featuring imported Chinese teabags and an epic foodie-friendly voyeuristic view of hanging Peking ducks. Finally, you'll spot a tiny parlor with a bar lined in jade-green subway tiles accompanied by a flock of goat figurines. The central meeting point for all of these rooms is a corrugated metal-topped bar meant to feel like, as Izard told me, an "outdoor bar shack."

I've been mesmerized by New York-based design firm AvroKO's attention to detail at other Boka Restaurant Group properties such as Momotaro and Swift & Sons, but those rooms were also cavernous. Though Duck Duck Goat holds a crowd, the individual spaces make the restaurant feel intimate and comforting.

Semi-authentic eats, fully awesome flavors

Our server was quick to tell us that the menu is made up of "semi-authentic" dishes,



Chongqing chicken



Wood-fired char siu ribs

a smart move considering some will undoubtedly question whether or not anyone in China actually eats goat (they do) or how Izard could consciously serve that American tiki restaurant invention known as crab rangoon.

In the spirit of so many Chinese restaurants—authentic or not—the menu at Duck Duck Goat is long. You'll have to venture back a few times to make your way through it. Many of the menu items here—from hand-pulled noodles to chili-spiced Chongqing chicken—are nuanced interpretations of dishes you might find at a 100-year-old restaurant in China.

Dim sum, a Chinese phrase that roughly translates to “touch the heart” in English, is a good place to start. Izard describes her culinary style as aiming to “make your whole mouth happy.” With her dim sum, she's also burning a fiery glow in your heart with smoky wood-fired duck heart slices swimming in a sesame- and horseradish-spiked mayo (\$12) and char siu ribs (\$16). For the latter, babybacks are cooked sous-vide style until tender and then glazed with a sticky sweet fermented tofu-, bourbon- and honey-infused housemade hoisin sauce. Cooking low and slow can sometimes result in mush, but Izard has expertly retained a delightful Southern barbecue pit-like bite to the flesh. The caramelized glaze finishes with notes of French roast and molasses.

The soup dumplings (\$11) here aren't quite as supple or bursting with broth as the ones I had a few weeks ago at newbie Imperial Lamian in River North, but the porky richness and contrasting vinegar punch from a side sauce are just as satisfying.

After dim sum, I picked an interlude from the cold dishes portion of the menu, a salad with octopus, peanut and crunchy cucumber (\$14). The dish is laced with chili, cilantro



and a deeply savory condiment Izard and her team refer to as “drool sauce” because “it makes your mouth water,” she explained. This dish refreshed me in the same way chomping on a cold slice of watermelon staves off suffocating summer heat.

The bowl of rice that started it all

There are also fried rice and noodle offerings on the menu. Izard said that the genesis of Duck Duck Goat came while she was sitting on the couch with husband Gary Valentine eating leftover fried rice from a Sunday Supper at Little Goat and realizing that the recipe was far less greasy than typical Chinese takeout fried rice.

Having sampled the seafood fried rice

(\$17) at Duck Duck Goat, I agree with her epiphany. By adding bright lemon notes and a touch of funky fish sauce to her rice, Izard transforms what is usually a gut bomb into a lighter intermezzo before hitting the main entrees. Smoked clams, ribbons of briny shrimp and chunks of flaky bass popped in my mouth like buried seafaring treasures.

It's getting hot in here

Chongqing chicken (\$16), fried nuggets of poultry covered in mouth-searing peppercorns and a mountain of grassy shishito peppers, snuck up on me with searing heat. The intensity grew, numbing my mouth like novocaine and coaxing out a narcotic-like high in my brain. I felt like the mix could have used a touch more salt

and the chicken pieces could have been a bit smaller so I could toss them in my mouth popcorn-style. But then again, I'm also lazy.

A bowl of glistening eggplant spears topped with frizzled onion and sprouts mounded over tender rounds of goat sausage (\$15) had a spicy edge tempered by zingy hints of black vinegar.

Washing it down

Valentine has curated a tight beer list featuring my all-time favorite, Miller High Life (\$5). I also enjoyed a funky farmhouse saison from Brasserie St. Feuillien (\$9) that complemented the fermented notes in many of the dishes I tried.

But thanks to a tip from my server, the best sip came with an Anderson Valley Brewing Co. Briney Melon gose (\$8); the sour, fruity finish cut through the heat of the Chongqing chicken.

A fine finish

I've been a big fan of Duck Duck Goat pastry chef Nate Meads ever since he started making killer macarons at his now-defunct bakery, Fritz Pastry. After plowing through a bowl of Taiwanese pineapple dessert (\$10)—a supremely moist cake swimming in a moat of lustrous, gooey soy caramel and melting cashew ice cream—I'm thinking about upping my fanaticism to full stalker status.

Bottom line

Duck Duck Goat, just like Imperial Lamian, isn't entirely real-deal Chinese cuisine. However, it's a smart, exciting melding of American ingenuity and authentic regional Chinese food imbued with Izard's joyful spirit, creating its own delightful new thing.

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