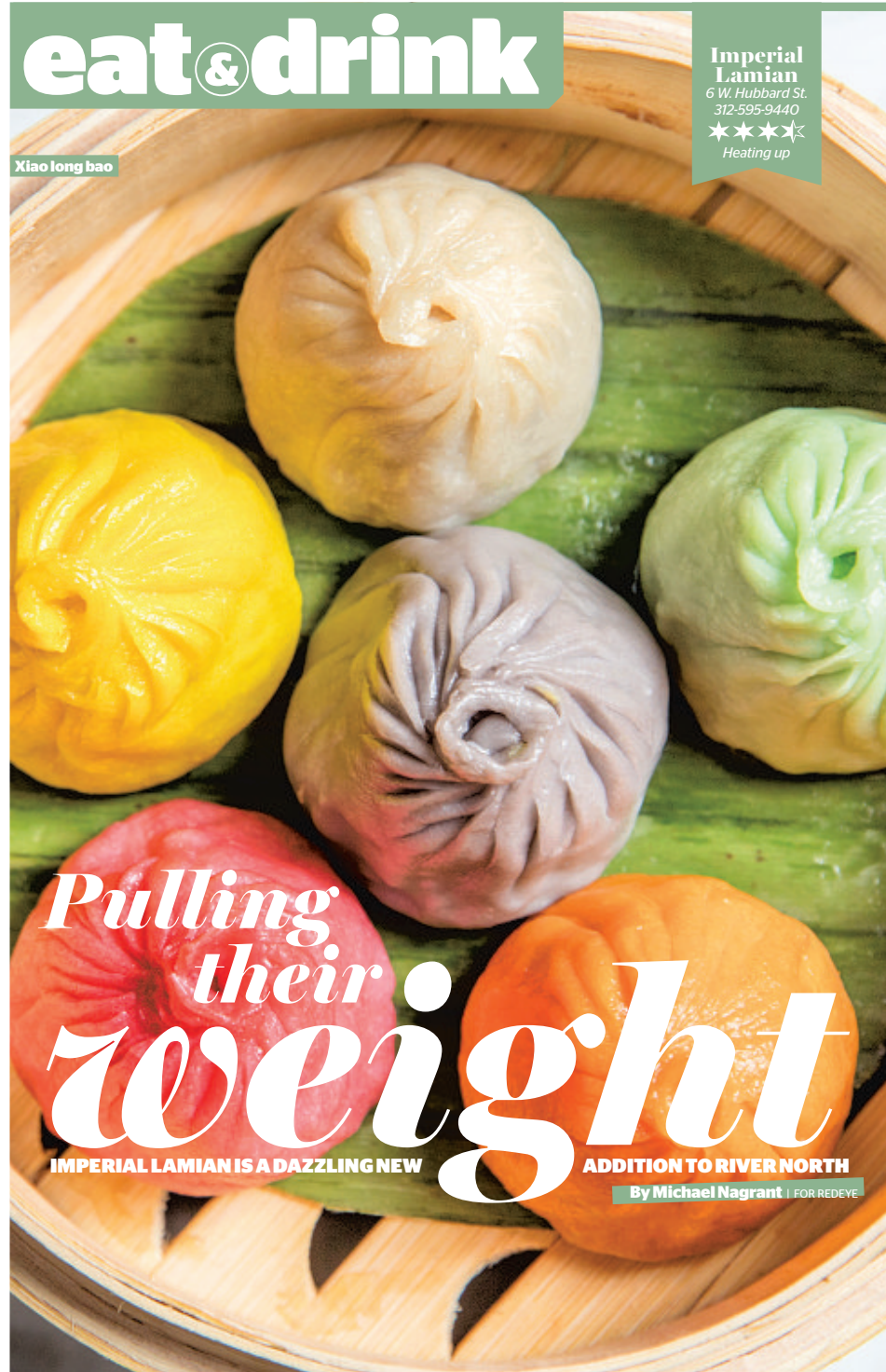


eat & drink

Imperial Lamian
6 W. Hubbard St.
312-595-9440
★★★★☆
Heating up

Xiao long bao



Pulling their weight

IMPERIAL LAMIAN IS A DAZZLING NEW ADDITION TO RIVER NORTH

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

I screwed up.

I showed up at a hot new restaurant in the middle of dinner rush hour looking for a table for six without a reservation. You see, I thought I'd made one, but it turned out I mistakenly booked a table a month out at Imperial Lamian in River North. The lobby filled with people. The open kitchen was a flurry. Steam poured from bamboo pots, and hand-pulled noodles thwacked against the counter. The restaurant buzzed, and I panicked. But the host smiled and said there was no need to worry—they'd have a table ready in 15 minutes. We were seated 10 minutes later.

Chinese food via Indonesia and an electrical engineer

This is a true testament to the level of service at Imperial Lamian. They didn't accommodate me because I'm a critic (I always use a pseudonym, and my friend did most of the talking). They sensed our disappointment and made something happen. What's even more extraordinary is that Imperial Lamian's Chicago location, the first to debut in the U.S. last month, was opened by a guy who was working as an engineer just a few years ago. A graduate of Purdue University, CEO and partner Vincent Lawrence admitted he "knew very little about restaurants" before this venture.

Raised in Jakarta, Indonesia, Lawrence knew all about Imperial Group, an Indonesia-based restaurant house that produces quality, experienced food that Lawrence couldn't find in Chinatown. He had a business partner with restaurant experience and hired consultants and designers who could fill in the gaps.

East meets West in form and function

One of those partners was Jakarta-based design firm Metaphor, the folks who have ultimately created one of the most beautiful dining rooms in the city. While I waited for my table, I had a good chance to ogle the space. The lobby is capped with a handful of turquoise-colored birdcages transformed into cool pendant lanterns. The floor is a swirl of marble tiling, and the polished stone host station is so imposing that Donald Trump might relish using it as a lectern. Dining room booths are separated by wooden dividers that look like giant abacuses. Gold-toned metal chandeliers—rich interpretations of what might be cheap paper lanterns in a pedestrian Chinese spot—hang overhead. In a time when many new restaurants use paint-by-numbers standards with chalkboards and reclaimed wood, Metaphor has created something inspiring and unique.

"Looking for real estate was a bit of a challenge. When we'd talk to landlords and we told them we were doing a Chinese restaurant, they all kind of got worried," Lawrence said. "They thought we were going to build a place covered in red with a bunch of dragons everywhere."



Char siu and wonton lamian



Jasmine tea smoked ribs



They don't serve tripe, but this ain't P.F. Chang's, either

These days, Chinese restaurants seem to have an impossible standard of “authenticity” imposed on them in a way that American restaurants do not. No one bats an eye if some hot chef is mixing goat cheese with shishito peppers and bacon. That’s considered creative. But if a Chinese restaurant isn’t serving innards and bitter melon or seasoning everything with mouth-searing Sichuan peppercorns, they’re not keeping it real.

But good is good. And China doesn’t have just one cuisine, just like Lamian doesn’t have just one chef. There are three: Andy Foo, the executive chef who handles plated entrees, appetizers and salads; dim sum head chef Lim Kee Tiong; and noodle head chef Wang Hong Jun.

Lamian’s menu focuses on a mix of Cantonese and Jiangsu cuisines. It’s salty, sweet and refined. While you’ll find some non-Chinese touches, like French-style laminated pastry on the dim sum, you won’t find General Tso’s chicken or crab rangoon.

When you do see crab on the menu, it will be premium lump crab mixed with silky pork stuffed into a delicate, hand-pinched dumpling filled with piping-hot broth (\$12). It’s called a xiao long bao, or soup dumpling, and you should definitely know the name before visiting. Another soup dumpling boasts that same pork swimming in a black truffle oil-scented broth that explodes in a funky

surprise (\$10). Simply put, Lamian serves the best soup dumplings in Chicago.

“We hand-pinch all of them minutes before service so the dough isn’t sitting around getting old,” Lawrence said. “We do hundreds, if not thousands, a night. When we get very busy, it gets very scary that we might not finish or that we might run out.”

Damn, that’s good dim sum

The menu’s dim sum section is robust and includes options such as the venison puff (\$12), which boasts a buttery puff pastry made in-house stuffed with tender shreds of roast venison spiced with black pepper and coated with a honey glaze and crunchy sesame seeds. Another bao-style bun is shaped like a mushroom and includes a dough stem. The outside is painted to look like it’s streaked with soil, and the insides are brimming with delicate shiitake threads and truffle oil (\$8).

Oodles of noodles

The lamian (“la” means stretched, “mian” means noodle), which is pulled to order, has a satisfying chew you don’t find in premade noodles. You can get a bunch of different flavor combinations, but I settled on a mix of char siu (barbecued pork), pork wontons and a runny soft-boiled egg (\$17). So many other places serve char siu that’s chewy and tastes

like cheap hoisin, but Lamian’s hearty cut of pork wafts star anise. The pork broth it’s served in isn’t the thick stuff that comes in ramen bowls, but a light brew that’s dappled with golden droplets of fat and smoky, salty flakes of shaved bonito.

The hot dish(es)

Not everything was perfect. I loved that the seafood fried rice (\$18) was larded with a bunch of whole lobster claws and creamy scallops and that the rice grains were distinct and firm. Bits of egg in the mix tasted like smoky custard. Still, it felt like the rice could use a bit more salt.

“I’ve heard that from others,” Lawrence said. “We’re trying to achieve what is referred to as ‘wok hay,’ which means we’re trying to infuse the flame of the wok and focus on the delicate flavors of the rice. If you drown the rice in soy sauce, those flavors get lost.”

A plank of charbroiled sea bass (\$35) was glazed with honey and plum, draped on a bed of grilled asparagus and crowned with a cotton candy-like nest of frizzled leeks. The flavors and presentation were remarkable, but the sea bass was slightly overcooked and a touch too firm.

But these things are minor. And once I bit into the jasmine tea smoked ribs (\$26), I forgot everything. They’re braised, slow-roasted and charbroiled. The result is tender with a

sweet and spicy crisp bark, evocative of the baked Canadian baby back ribs with serious Chinese flavors.

You’ll also want to try the crispy prawn (\$23), which is sort of a riff on honey walnut shrimp. Instead of the usual cloying presentation sogged with mayo, Lamian’s version is tempura-battered to flaky perfection and lightly drizzled with wasabi aioli. There’s an acidic passionfruit swirl that cuts through the sweetness.

A mule from another mother

There’s a decent sake list here, but I stuck to cocktails, which included a bracing Singapore Sling (\$14) and a fantastic Amaro Mule (\$12). The Moscow mule you know and love is a great summer sipper, but after a few, the sweetness of the ginger beer can put you in a sugar coma. Lamian’s cocktail packs real ginger heat and a pungent kick of lime plus the bitter finish of amaro instead of vodka. It’s a balanced, complex sip.

Bottom line

Imperial Lamian’s arrival in River North should be worrisome for nearby Chinese chain P.F. Chang’s. The gourmet, well-executed cuisine is so good that I imagine they’ll steal away a lot of business, not to mention that of other middling Hubbard Street restaurants nearby.

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