



Lobster cloppino LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE

# Shack up



By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

**L**ocated inside the Google building in Fulton Market, Smack Shack is not, as its name might suggest, an underground fight club for disgruntled techies. It's the second location of a warehouse-sized seafood restaurant that started out as a humble food truck in Minneapolis in 2010. It gets its name from old East Coast fishing vessels called smacks. I like to imagine salty Boston fishermen used to say stuff like, "I pahked de smahk in Da-Ches-ter bay and it's fullah lobstah."

I stopped in recently to see if Smack Shack would wallop me upside the head with flavor or leave me feeling shipwrecked.

**The scene**

The Chicago location has a repurposed warehouse feel and tall glass windows that open for breezy summertime dining. It's a pretty good facsimile of the original in Minneapolis, which I've also visited. As you enter, there's a huge custom lobster boil pot roiling with Old Bay-spiked stock, which

acts as a centerpiece in the massive space. There's also a huge live well behind the boil that holds lobsters flown in daily. Tables are adorned with red and white checkered tablecloths, and the chairs are a mishmash assortment of industrial metal and wood that look like they were cribbed from a restaurant supply fire sale.

**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



**Chilled shrimp cocktail** LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE



**Mezcalito cocktail** LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE

**The food**

There are a lot of lobster options on the menu including boils, rolls, mac 'n' cheese, guacamole and burgers. The lobster cioppino (\$36) is an oval-shaped skillet filled to the brim with a harissa-spiked tomato and tarragon broth overflowing with mussels, shrimp, lobster tails, clams, hunks of flaky striped sea bass and planks of crusty bread. It's a soulful garlicky brew that's on par with some of the best bouillabaisse I've slurped in my lifetime.

There are two lobster rolls on offer: a cold salad version that's studded with cucumber and a hot butter-soaked version dripping with lemon and chive served on a split-top bun made locally at D'Amato's Bakery (\$20 each). I opted for the warm version and was rewarded with a golden bun overflowing with what seemed like a pound of meat. It's probably one of the better rolls in town.

King crab dripping in a fondue of fontina cheese dip punctuated with red pepper and artichoke (\$17) was as tender as any I'd ever had. Smack Shack chef/partner Josh Thoma said the meat comes from a Duluth, Minn., fisherman who converted a Coast Guard icebreaker into a crab boat and established a king crab fishing operation in Alaska. Thoma said his source, unlike many of the fishermen you see on Discovery Channel's "Deadliest Catch," is one of the few who still process the meat on the boat. This is important because if crab sits too long, the muscles begin to waste away and the flesh isn't as desirable.

The chilled shrimp cocktail (\$20), which



**MINI-REVIEW**  
**Smack Shack**  
 326 N. Morgan St.  
 312-973-1336  
 ★★☆☆☆  
 Off to a good start

features a half-dozen Kraken-sized shrimp dusted with Old Bay, was briny, juicy and accompanied by a tangy ginger-mustard aioli and smoky cocktail sauce teeming with horseradish. I also opted for Southern fried chicken (\$17 with slaw and one side) because my server raved about it. The brined poultry was juicy to the core, but the skin was bogged down with flour.

"I'm always telling my cooks to watch the heavy hand with the breading," Thoma said. "I worked at KFC in 1989, and there's a trick they teach you to knock your wrists together to get the excess flour off."

I forgave the chicken, however, because

it came with the fluffiest grits (\$4 a la carte) I've ever tasted. Local milled corn is tossed with butter, salt, pepper and a touch of cream that results in a corn-perfumed cloud.

**The drinks**

The Market Rhum Punch cocktail (\$12) filled with rum, ginger liqueur, lime juice, soda and simple syrup was watered down, resulting in more of a rum hug. The real punch came from a drink called the Mezcalito (\$12), a smoky modern riff on the Paloma featuring mezcal, grapefruit and lime juices and agave nectar. The beer list is small but well-curated. I dug the bitter, caramel-hinted Solemn Oath Punk Rock for Rich Kids pale ale (\$7).

**The dessert**

I told my dining companion I'd bet two of my fingers there would be key lime pie (\$8) on the dessert menu, and lo and behold there was. It was a decent version with a tightly packed graham-cracker crust. What elevated it was segments of fresh lime that were placed on top of the pie curd. The bitter and sour notes of the lime meshed well with the sweet custard underneath.

**The service**

Our server was incredibly laid-back, peppering his menu explanations with "dude" and "bro." He described the entire beer menu in terms of IBU, the International Bitterness Units scale (Coors Light registers at 9, while Revolution Brewing Anti-Hero IPA clocks in at 70). Not everyone will appreciate the added detail, but as a beer lover, I was totally geeked he knew his stuff.

I tend to avoid server upsells because I usually suspect they're trying to push a high margin or past-its-prime menu item. But my guy was so stoked that I felt compelled to try a bunch of his recs. Except for the fried chicken, he was spot-on with his picks, including those super-fine grits.

**Bottom line:** If it's lobster you crave, Smack Shack is a fine choice for a fix. Whereas Oyster Bah in Lincoln Park is intimate and focused on modern twists like whole snapper smothered in Thai chili, Smack Shack is a huge welcoming party serving up more straightforward Eastern seaboard classics along with Southern foodie gems.

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