

eat & drink



LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE PHOTOS

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

There's a place called Hotel Unicoco & Nite Club in the small Nigerian city of Aba, Abia. It's reportedly a place where the Kennedy family and notable foreign dignitaries visiting Africa drank, ate and listened to music. In the 1970s, Unicoco was considered an African analogue to Harlem's Apollo Theatre, an epicenter for Nigeria's burgeoning music scene.

Earlier this year, Obi Nwazota, who hails from the eastern part of Nigeria, decided to introduce Chicago to the flavors and culture of his homeland. He dubbed his new Rogers Park restaurant Little Unicoco in honor of the famed Nigerian hotel.

"We hope to have the same magic and fame as the original Unicoco," general manager Harrison Adeoye said. "We hope one day maybe [Barack] Obama will come through the door and we'll know we have made it."

If the notable eater-in-chief does walk through that door, the dish he'll want to

Suya

\$10 at Little Unicoco 1631 W. Howard St. 773-764-2626

WORTH A TRIP

try is suya, a tender flank steak cut thin like jerky. Traditionally, it's dried in the hot African sun, but at Unicoco, they grill it to order and sprinkle it with a mix of peanuts, chili and a blend of herbs and spices called yaji. The crispy crusted spiced beef is draped over a bed of raw tomatoes and onion and wrapped in newspaper-printed paper, much like British fish and chips. Suya is reminiscent of a great late-night Greek gyro without the pita.

There are plenty of other tasty goodies on offer, and the menu is split into sections called "small chops," or finger and street foods, and "large chops," more substantial entree-size portions made up of soups and stews. Adeoye was a fabulous ambassador, guiding me through the various flavors and

options. At one point, he even brought out raw alligator pepper, which has a floral perfume like Szechuan peppercorns but very little of the stinging bite. But I'm most thankful that he pointed me to a catfish stew called ofe nsala (\$16) that boasts spicy, peanut buttery notes and reminded me of a good New Orleans etouffee.

All that spice will leave you thirsty, and while there's a wide assortment of cocktails, wine and beer on offer, non-alcoholic options such as Schweppes bitter lemon soda (\$2.50) and Malta Guinness (\$3), which drinks like Coca-Cola infused with molasses and yeast, are fabulous whistle wetters you must try.

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

