



eat & drink

Pork ribs

# SMALL SPACE, huge TASTE

GIANT IS A MASSIVE HIT IN LOGAN SQUARE

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

Visions of maple-glazed crispy pig ears have been dancing in my head for years since I tried them at chef Jason Vincent's now-defunct Nightwood in Pilsen. They were one of those iconic Chicago dishes, like Avec's bacon-wrapped dates or Alinea's black truffle explosion. But as of 2015, they were no more. Though he was named a Food & Wine magazine best new chef (the equivalent of an Oscar in the culinary world), Vincent went into semi-retirement to raise his two young children. But it was only a matter of time before he re-emerged, and earlier this year he announced a partnership with Josh Perlman (Avec) and chef de cuisine Ben Lustbader to open Giant in Logan Square. I stopped in recently to see if his new venture could hold its own.

**Humble brag, minus the brag**

As a new food writer, I was obsessed with Paul Kahan and Blackbird. The first time I interviewed him, I would have asked for his autograph on a slice of bacon had I not been

so nervous. The thing I loved about Kahan was how he cooked what was then called new American cuisine like an Asian chef, seeking balance across all flavors.

Vincent has recently taken a seat next to Kahan in my heart (and stomach). Like Kahan, he's humble. When I asked if the name Giant was a metaphor for what he hoped the restaurant would become or how great it was, he fervently responded: "No. Not at all. I don't want people to think that. I was reading [Shel Silverstein's] 'Where the Sidewalk Ends' to my daughter and she loved that poem ['Me and My Giant']. I think you can anthropomorphize a space, and when we found our current space, which was tiny, it felt like a bit of an ironic fit calling it Giant."

**Hot and bothered**

As much as I love Vincent's cooking, I also love air conditioning. My parents raised me

in a house cooled to a constant 68 degrees. If I'm away from electric cooling for too long, I sweat like a glass of champagne in the Sahara. The night I visited Giant, it was 87 degrees and the air conditioning struggled.

Despite the cooling problems, the room—which features a wall of sharp angular wood inlays, patchwork-style yellow- and gray-quilted banquettes and menu boards with leather straps that allow them to hang on the side of your table should you want to order multiple rounds of food (and you will)—is pretty cool. The dining room isn't for everyone.

If you're one of those people who grumbles about shuffling around and bumping fellow diners at Avec, you might have a tough time at Giant.

A pair of Gramovox vertical floating record players hover over the kitchen pass. Throughout the night, the staff curates vinyl hits from folks like Curtis Mayfield and Color Me Badd. And frankly, there's

no better soundtrack for eating sea urchin gonads (more on those later) than "I Wanna Sex You Up." Artwork includes a blown-up illustration and the first couple of stanzas from "Me and My Giant" as well as a painting of a woman strapping herself into an airplane seat while floating in mid-air.

**Pour some uni on me**

It's an appropriate painting for the space as you'll want to strap in for the earth-shaking goodies at Giant. I quickly forgot about the pig ears and got on board with Vincent's new signature dish, the uni shooter (\$5): a deep-fried ball filled with sweetened condensed milk and uni (a.k.a. sea urchin roe) that explodes in your mouth like a water balloon teeming with funky candied custard. "We almost didn't do it because it's so of-the-moment. We didn't want to seem trendy," Vincent said. "But it's so good. We're selling like 60 or 70 of these a night."

We followed this up with fluffy biscuits (\$3 each) studded with glinting turbinado

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Off to a good start



sugar crystals dripping with jalapeno butter, a recipe that Mollie Hayward, one of Nightwood's old line cooks, used to prepare for staff meals. Having over-ordered in general, we were conservative here and stupidly requested only two biscuits to share for our table of four. Don't make the same mistake.

The charred carrots (\$10) dripped with uni butter, thai chili and tomato sofrito sauce, a crunchy hail of peanuts and flecks of scallion. The dish was so savory and mouth-coating, you'd swear it was doused in MSG. (For the record, I love MSG. I would snort it if I could, headaches be damned.) A dish called picci with chew (\$16), which sounds like a Pokémon Go character, was actually udon-like noodles that had a very satisfying bite. Tossed with bacon and glossy buttery fat, it ate like a carbonara with one very smart addition: "We griddle off jalapenos on our plancha or flat top and then soak them in apple cider vinegar and lemon juice to give the dish some acid. Acid is everything. It's life," Vincent said. "Unless we're talking about acid at a three-day Phish concert in Vegas. That's not very good. Trust me."

There are also pecan-smoked ribs (\$18) slathered with a sauce made from 40 very precisely weighed and measured ingredients. This may sound cheffy and gourmet, but it results in a sticky-sweet lacquer with a bitter molasses counterbalance that Vincent should consider bottling (at least to pay for air conditioning). The ribs themselves weren't fall-off-the-bone baby food but a meaty plank with a firm chew. They were accompanied by baked beans, which was the only thing I didn't totally love. "That dish is sort of inspired by the vegetarian Heinz beans I used to eat at 3 a.m. from the pot after work," Vincent said. Though he nailed the nostalgia play and they do taste like Heinz beans, I've never been a baked

beans dude, and the dish didn't quite pop like everything else I tried.

### Perfect pairings

While some wine lists may be characterized as food-friendly, Giant's options—which include a lot of crisp and fruity whites—are straight-up BFFs with Vincent's food. I really liked a 2008 Richter Riesling Kabinett (\$11) that tasted of honey and pear. I also channeled my inner Carrie Bradshaw and ordered the Cosmopolitan (\$11). My wife looked at me like I'd just put on a mud mask, drawn a bubble bath and sidled up to the latest issue of Vogue, but when she tasted the elixir of gin, peach-infused Campari, vermouth and lemon juice, she was very jealous.

Throughout the meal, our server seemed overwhelmed, and we had to flag him down quite a few times to order extra rounds of drinks and more food. Unfortunately, our second round of drinks arrived after our dinner plates were cleared.

### Bottom line

There were some service challenges and an air conditioning snafu, but I'd honestly eat Vincent's food in a tent in the desert. He is one of Chicago's very best chefs, and the food he's putting out at Giant is some of the most satisfying, well-executed non-fussy stuff around. The menu, save for the beans, is universally excellent and rates better than any of the places I've given a full four stars to this year.

There are restaurants I review and restaurants I go to for personal pleasure. If you want to discover the city's best restaurants, ask a food critic where he or she celebrates birthdays or anniversaries. Giant is a place I will return to over and over when I'm not on the clock.

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