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HOW TO NAVIGATE NORTH MAYFAIR'S NEW FILIPINO MEGA-STORE SEAFOOD CITY

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

There are a lot more Filipino grandmas in Chicago than I thought. I know this because on a random Thursday afternoon, I was surrounded by dozens of them chowing down on barbecue pork skewers at the new Filipino mega-mart Seafood City located in North Mayfair.

Here's the thing about grandmas: They've been around. They're wise. And most importantly, they know what's good. Having written about Filipino food for a while, I have an idea about what's good, but I'm no expert. So I watch the experts to see what they're ordering and I copy them. I'm sure more than one person at Seafood City that day thought to themselves, "Why is this bearded white dude standing so close to me?" I apologize to all the grandmas I hovered near last week; I was just trying to learn. Apologies aside, let me tell you what I learned so you too can navigate Seafood City.

## THE GROCERY

Remember the first time you walked into a Barnes & Noble and just kind of flipped out? "So many books! OMG, I can sit in that comfortable chair and just read for free?" That's kind of how it is at Seafood City. It's a true mega-mart. The sweet tang of barbecue sauce and grill smoke hangs in the air while a mass of people jockey in the food court for noodles, fried things and grilled meat. More on those later.



The grocery itself is stocked with more root vegetables than Peter Rabbit's neighbor Mr. McGregor's garden. Rice can be procured by the 50-pound bagful. **There are at least 10 kinds of fish sauce**, some infused with citrus juice. Towering stacks of dried noodles would make any self-respecting Italian jealous. You know how there are usually a few dusty forgotten bags of questionable pork rinds at your corner bodega? Pork rinds, or chicharon, dominate the chip aisle at Seafood City, and many of them come with vinegar packets so you can create DIY salt and vinegar pork chips on demand.



But perhaps the most glorious part of the store is its namesake, the fresh fish section. I have long hated pointing through glass at Whole Foods and having awkward conversations with supposed fishmongers about freshness and cooking times. You can't smell the fish or really see how firm the flesh is. At Seafood City, mountains of little neck clams, armies of silvery whole fish and pink curled nubs of shrimp are **splayed out on ice in the open**, ready for you to take a whiff of or prod. Of course, this is a blessing and a curse as some shoppers believe it's their duty to rough up a whole school of dead tilapia until they

find the right one. But most are respectful, and the seafood procurement interactivity is addictive.

The meat counter is still old-school and glassed-in, but unlike at most meat counters, there's rusty-colored fat fingers of longanisa pork sausage and ruby-toned anise-perfumed tocino, aka Filipino bacon, neither of which you'll find at Mariano's.

The freezer case has lumpia Shanghai or garlicky pork- and/or chicken-stuffed crispy spring rolls that you can thaw and cook at home and dip in sweet chili sauce (from the condiment aisle). There's also avocado ice





Barbecue chicken skewers



Lumpia Shanghai



Beef wonton noodle

cream. I haven't tried it, but pandan, which is sort of nutty and sweet like hazelnut, is a favorite of mine that's also on offer.

Speaking of the condiment aisle, you can also find Kewpie mayo, which sushi restaurants often use as the thick, lustrous basis for spicy mayo. Sushi obviously isn't Pinoy, a word used to describe people or things of Filipino origin, but that's the thing about Seafood City. It's not strictly Filipino, but a giant purveyor of all kinds of Asian ingredients as well as truly American ones (Teriyaki-flavored Spam, anyone?). If you like to make pho, a Vietnamese noodle soup, at home like me, Seafood City has packs of excellent springy tendon meatballs (bo vien) and blocks of jiggy honeycomb tripe, both of which can be tough to track down outside of places like Viet Hoa in Uptown. (In fact, I worry that just as Barnes & Noble put so many independent mom-and-pop bookstores out of business, Seafood City might do the same to small Asian groceries in the area.)

If you're thirsty reading about pho and Spam, might I suggest you grab a few bottles of Ginseng Up grape soda from the refrigerated section? Unlike syrupy Fanta and its ilk, the dry earthy punch of ginseng makes this soda taste more like semi-dry champagne.

There is also a half-aisle devoted to giant blue tins of Danish butter cookies. My Polish grandparents always had these around—we ate those pretzel-shaped morsels with the big, glistening sugar crystals on top and left the plain un-sugared circular cookies untouched—so I was confused as to what they were doing here. A little internet research suggests Danish butter cookies are popular amongst Filipinos who grew up before World War II and see them as a nostalgic goodie. Apparently Danish butter cookies are a universal grandparent thing.



### IT'S REALLY PRETTY UP IN GRILL CITY

They say you should never shop on an empty stomach, which is very true. The times I've shopped while famished, I've ended up returning home with a year's supply of Totino's pizza rolls and Hot Pockets. The good news is that Seafood City has a majestic food court with three different fast-service counters: Grill City with grilled meats and seafood, Crispy Town with an almost dangerously large selection of deep-fried everything and Noodle Street with noodle stir-frys, fried rice and soups.

Start with Grill City. On two separate visits in the middle of the workday, this counter was backed up with long lines. On one visit there was a 40-minute wait for barbecue pork and barbecue chicken skewers (both \$10.95 for 4 skewers). Place your order here, and by the time you're done getting food from the other counters, your grilled goodies will be ready.

Of course, you could forgo the line, but the barbecue chicken—carbonized, sweet and sticky—is one of the very best things at this counter. The pork was also good, but there were a lot of fatty cuts mixed in that chewed like a Goodyear tire. Squid (\$15.50 for 2 pieces) is often notable for having a similar chew, but the giant "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea"-worthy **grilled squid** here was tender and smoky and one of my favorite

cuts. Bangus or milkfish (\$12.50 for 2 pieces) filled with a pico de gallo-like stuffing of tomato and onion was remarkably flaky, clean and briny. Grilled pork belly or liempo (\$12.50 for 2 pieces) was dry, chewy and overcooked to a well-done tennis ball-like consistency and should be avoided.

### TAKE YOU DOWN TO CRISPY TOWN

If you're craving pork belly, order the deep-fried slabs of it known as **crispy bagnet** (\$13.99 per pound) served at the Crispy Town counter. Once you order, it's chopped into little square pieces that you can toss in your mouth over and over again like Skittles. In the same vein, you might also enjoy giant brontosaurus-sized crispy pata (\$13.99 per pound), or deep-fried pork knuckle, which comes with a savory dipping gravy.

If you don't fancy making lumpia Shanghai (\$2.99 for 4 piece) at home, as recommended in the grocery section above, you can just buy it cooked and ready to eat at Crispy Town. They're pretty good, though not as good as the light, crisp, oil-dappled stuff served at Isla Pilipina in Lincoln Square. Avoid the salt and pepper shrimp (\$13.99 per pound), which might as well just be called shrimp due to the lack of salt or pepper. Crispy chicharon calamari (\$6.99) is good and comes with a lemon sauce for dipping, but eat it fast as it sogs down quickly.



### NOODLIN' AROUND NOODLE STREET

Noodle Street doesn't have quite the broad delectable selection of Crispy Town and Grill City. The fried rice and noodle offerings are precooked and sitting in steam trays, and when I ordered shrimp fried rice (\$6.95), the remnant rice was literally scraped off the bottom of a pan to fill my order. The pancit noodles in the canton guisado (\$5.95), studded with beef, carrot and scallions, were gluey. Stick to the soup here, especially the beef wonton noodle (\$5.95), which features a sweet spiced comforting broth filled with hunks of bone-in beef and soft white dumplings and channels a great bowl of pho.

### COMING SOON AND SWEET GOODBYES

There's a bakery called Valerio's that hasn't opened just yet, and Grill City promises to eventually serve Silog plates featuring garlic rice, a fried egg and your choice of meat, one of my favorite Filipino dishes. In the meantime, get your Silog fix at Uncle Mike's Place in West Town.

All three of the food court options offer an awesome calamansi juice, which tastes like a mashup of orange and lime, and gulaman (\$2.50 each), a brown sugar-flavored boba tea filled with gooey tapiocas. Both are pretty refreshing.

For dessert there's halo halo, a traditional Filipino treat featuring various ice creams, shaved ice, candied jellies, beans and coconut. It wasn't available when I visited, so I opted for deep-fried, sesame-crusting glutinous rice balls stuffed with sweet bean paste called buchi (\$2.50 for 6 pieces). They tasted like warm donuts filled with pie filling. I liked them. But don't take my word for it—the grandmas were big fans too.

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