

Steady Income

EDGEWATER NEWCOMER
INCOME TAX FEELS LIKE HOME



By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

All-encompassing menus are generally the province of Greek diners and recent culinary school grads who somehow fumbled into an executive chef role. As such, I had my suspicions when I saw the menu at Income Tax, a new Edgewater restaurant from chef Ryan Henderson (Maple & Ash), owner Nelson Fitch and GM Collin Moody. The dishes here are broken down by four countries: Spain, France, Italy and Germany. I also noticed that the Income Tax guys dubbed themselves a “neighborhood restaurant,” which is often shorthand for “Yeah, we have dry roast chicken, a mediocre burger and some beers on tap.” Things didn’t look good.

The experience

To make matters worse, even though I had a reservation and the room was relatively empty when we arrived, the host paraded me and my crew past a row of puffy banquettes and a cozy candle-lit bar and sat us at the one communal table in the dining room. As you might know by now, I

like communal seating as much as Donald Trump likes journalists. I know the two guys in the party next to us felt the same way because when my young son sat next to them, their eyes bugged out in fear. But the room filled with people and a friendly buzz grew. Folks bellied up to the marble-topped wooden bar and clinked wine glasses.

Cocktail shakers rattled, and soon, the place felt like a secret speakeasy party with my best friends.

And in case you’re wondering: The name of the restaurant was inspired by a classic cocktail made with gin, vermouth and citrus that Moody and Fitch stumbled across in a vintage cocktail book.

“Yeah, the name was inspired by the cocktail, but also it reminded us of the neighborhood. In Edgewater, there are all these mom-and-pop businesses with signs that say ‘mattress store’ or ‘hardware store.’ We liked the idea of a sign that was stark that just said Income Tax,” Moody said. “We also joke that while alcohol taxes your body, it’s a great social lubricant that promotes a communal feeling, and that’s what we wanted to create.”

The service

The service only added to the warmth of the room. Along with a talent for inspiring fear in single hipster dudes, my son is also a very picky eater. He barely tolerates chicken nuggets, much less salad Beaucaire, a

French plate made with endive, beet, celery root and ham offered on the Income Tax menu. I asked our server if the kitchen could maybe do an improv plate of buttered noodles. (Note: I absolutely hate making asks like this. But I also dragged my son along on this review and didn’t want him to starve.) I know it’s

not fair to the kitchen, and I told the server to disregard the request if it was too tough. Still, he came back a few minutes later and said that the kitchen staff meal featured spaghetti and they could take care of us.

MINI-REVIEW
Income Tax
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Honeymoon cocktail**The food**

Though you may not recognize Henderson by name, he's worked with some heavy hitters including Alex Stupak (Alinea), Wylie Dufresne (Alder and WD50 in New York) and, most recently, Danny Grant (Maple & Ash). That pedigree shows. Though he serves a pan-European menu, Henderson executes it with grace. There's also some method to his madness.

"When I saw Collin and Nelson's wine list and how it was broken down by country, I decided I wanted the food menu to read like an old wine list with selections from different countries," he said. "I had thousands of options for dishes, but I tried to pick the stuff we really liked eating personally."

There are a lot of greatest hits on offer, such as Spanish tapas fave pan con tomate (\$6) and French classics coq au vin (\$20) and macarons (\$4) for dessert. But there are also surprising gems like the aforementioned Beaucaire (\$12). The salad was a tongue-delighting melange of bitter, acidic and sweet flavors that closed with the salty porky salvation courtesy of La Quercia prosciutto.

"The New York public library has this huge collection of old menus. I found that

dish from a 1930s menu," Henderson said. "We modernized it. Instead of using mayo, we dressed it with a broken vinaigrette."

But the best dish at Income Tax is a housemade carrot agnolotti (\$16), featuring silky carrot-infused pasta wrappers stuffed with roasted oyster mushrooms and tangy sour cream. Purple carrot slices from Nichols Farm & Orchard added a nice raw crunch, and crispy nubbins of fried sweetbreads dotted the plate. Chitarra pasta (\$15) is made with a burnt onion puree that turned the noodles black, making it look like they were infused with squid ink. The puree also raised the pH of the dough so that the finished noodle possessed a satisfying chew. Tangled in the noodles were juicy Smurf-sized lamb meatballs smothered in a tomato-red pepper sauce dotted with refreshing bits of mint. The sauce could have used a touch more salt.

It may sound like the name of particularly eccentric German dude, but flammenkuchen (\$9) is actually a famous savory Alsatian tart. If you want a decent poor man's version, try the one from the Trader Joe's frozen food aisle. If you want a decadent rich man's version featuring an olive-oil infused flaky

cracker crust stuffed with creamy fromage blanc fondue (this dish should come with a free angiogram) and studded with hunks of bacon and sweet soft pearl onions, head straight to Income Tax.

The drinks

The wine list is fantastic and features tons of small producers and inspired selections. I especially dug a yeasty dry sparkler pétillant naturel from La Ferme du Plateau (\$14). According to my server, the stuff was produced by a goat farmer. I'm now convinced that all my bubbly should come from shepherds.

The Honeymoon cocktail (\$14)—a mix of apple brandy, orange liqueur, Benedictine and lemon—was as bright as a sunrise and popped with citrus and bitter notes. Less successful was a spritz (\$10) featuring Americano Rosa and prosecco. It was flat and really needed a bit more sweetness. Moody says they have rejiggered it since I visited.

The dessert

Last year I wrote a love letter to the canele at Cellar Door Provisions in Logan Square. At some point, I may do the same for Income

**Canele****Flammenkuchen**

Tax's offering (\$3). It features the same contrasting crunchy outer shell and custardy innards as Cellar Door Provisions' version but wafts a haunting pine perfume courtesy of a dousing in sapin liqueur.

Bottom line

I may give a restaurant three or four stars, but that doesn't mean it's necessarily a personal favorite. About once or twice a year, I discover a restaurant that I know I will return to over and over again because it speaks to my heart, the kind of place I visit when I'm not on the clock as a food writer. Restaurants in this category have included Vera, Cellar Door Provisions, Giant and the now-defunct Nightwood. Income Tax falls into this group. You might remember from few weeks ago that, though I liked it, I thought something was missing at Publican Anker. It felt too transactional. Income Tax has what Anker is missing. It's small and its crew takes care of you on a very personal and deliberate level. It feels like home.

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