



# FOOD FOR THOUGHT

**KITSUNE, THE LATEST FROM ILIANA REGAN, DELIVERS WILDLY INTERESTING FLAVORS**

Tonkotsu ramen

**By Michael Nagrant** | FOR REDEYE

The good news is the restaurant ceiling didn't fall on my head. When I dine at chef Iliana Regan's restaurants, weird things happen. When I reviewed Regan's Elizabeth, I went to the restroom, and when I closed the door, ceiling tiles fell on my head. I didn't mind. The tiles were soft and I was so buzzed on the foraged pre-fixe meal (and, to be honest, a little too much Hermitage blanc wine), I wouldn't have felt pain anyway. That night, Regan and her crew were very gracious and apologized for the mishap. Regan and I had a good laugh about this when we spoke last week about her new spot, Kitsune, a Japanese-skewing restaurant in Lincoln Square. "I think the bones of this place are much more solid," she said.

## Champagne supernova

What I didn't tell Regan is that there was another mishap at Kitsune. I didn't say anything because what happened was a result of my own idiocy. For now, Kitsune is BYOB, so I toted along some sparkling rosé. Contrary to what you see on TV, the proper way to open a bottle of sparkling wine isn't to shake it like a Polaroid picture and flip the cork off with your thumb. If you turn the bottle

slowly while gently pulling on the cork, there should be a soft "pffff" of air, no spills. I did this, but I was so excited to open the bottle that I forgot it had sloshed around in the back of my car on the way to the restaurant. A fountain of wine soaked my wife's foot, the front of my shirt and the banquette seat next to me.

As a testament to its fine service, the Kitsune staff rushed over with towels and

helped clean up the mess. When the server took our order, she didn't even stare at the giant wet spot creeping below my left shirt pocket. Though I looked like Marco Rubio schvitzing at a debate, no jokes were made at my expense.

## Restaurant Nirvana?

When I reviewed Elizabeth, I compared the restaurant to Nirvana's "Bleach" album. You could see some serious sparks of brilliance, but it wasn't fully formed end-to-end like, say, "Nevermind." There were some hits but also many misses.

Nirvana bassist Krist Novoselic once said, "Nirvana didn't go to the mainstream, the mainstream came to Nirvana." As a chef, Regan sings a similar tune. She is uncompromising and relentless and cooks with a very different voice. She often does things the hard way. She doesn't buy fermented ingredients, like miso out of the box, but makes them from scratch. She'll buy meat not from a mainline distributor like Sysco but from

a dude shooting squirrels in Indiana. If she needs frog legs, she's going out in the middle of the night with a pitchfork.

At Kitsune, Regan has toned things down a bit. She's more of a conductor, guiding and harnessing the creativity of her team instead of being the sole driving force. When we spoke, she talked about making compromises to the traditional American palate while staying true to classic Japanese dishes. She achieves accessibility by combining local and Midwestern ingredients with Japanese recipes and techniques.

## Gonads, ferments and ramen madness

One of the best things I ate was a piece of raw uni dusted with pulverized nori, sugar and sea salt splashed with yuzu juice (\$11). As much as foodies love uni, most of America is not pining for sea urchin gonads sprinkled with dried seaweed. Yet the resulting taste—a scoop of citrus-spritzed and slightly funky custard—should be universally delicious



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—Michael Nagrant

### Whiskey and doughnuts

A doughnut glazed with Japanese whiskey icing (\$3.50) was as soft as a cloud. In a blind taste test, this doughnut would make a Krispy Kreme seem like wet cardboard. It was dusted with green tea powder that cut through the sugary glaze. Regan and her crew would cut back on the green tea powder a touch as the aftertaste became a little too bitter.

Also assertive was a pungent goat's milk yogurt adorned with satsuma granita crystals and caramelized nubs of sweet potato (\$7). The contrast of textures and temperatures was lively but ate more like a healthy breakfast than a crave-worthy dessert.

### The bottom line

Kitsune isn't quite the restaurant equivalent of the pitch-perfect “Nevermind.” The plate selection is more familiar and accessible than my experience at Elizabeth, but there are still some jagged edges.

Kitsune is more like Nirvana's “In Utero.” The dining room is intimate, and the plate glass window in the front frosts with steam. There's a towering wood cubby stuffed with cute fox figurines and a framed photo of Barack Obama. For the most part, the restaurant comforts and wraps around you like Kurt Cobain's plaintive lullaby “All Apologies.” But sometimes, when I'm eating funky yogurt with orange ice crystals, I'm jarred and alienated the same way I am when I listen to Cobain's blood-curdling screams on “Scentless Apprentice.”

Despite its commercial success, Nirvana felt like “Nevermind” was too overproduced and “In Utero” was a deliberate rejection of soulless industry gloss. Some think it's Nirvana's best album. While Kitsune often gives diners what they want, it also gives them something to think about, and as far as I'm concerned, that makes it really interesting.

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

if people open their minds to it. In other dishes, there was hesitation. A bowl of wild rice with ferments (\$9) features Minnesota wild rice mixed with fermented chestnut. I expected it to be assertive, bright, acidic and fizzy. And though the rice was comforting and substantial, the sour oomph never came.

Ramen is so prevalent these days that people seem to be in an arms race to make it as complex as humanly possible. They gild their bowls with pickles, bamboo, fishcakes and black garlic. It's only a matter of time before ramen goes full bloody mary and ends up accessorized with pizza and mini-cheeseburgers. Regan and her team's restraint helps diners focus on what makes good ramen: deeply savory broth, chewy slurpable noodles and a few simple condiments.

Regan's milky tonkotsu broth (\$17) has more body and structure than Brad Pitt's character in “Legends of the Fall.” The split soft-boiled egg is creamy and fortifies the soup. The pork is braised in a housemade teriyaki and then sauteed to order. The result is a firm plank of pork bursting with sweet and salty notes. The noodles are so chewy that I was sure they were made in-house and not sourced from artisan maker Sun Noodle.

“Yep, they're Sun,” Regan said. “I went to Ivan Ramen in New York and I see a dolly with 10 cases of Sun noodles rolling up. Part of my heart broke. But I talked to Ivan [Orkin] about it, and he said you should always have your own recipe that you love



Okonomiyaki  
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE PHOTOS

and know, but you also have to work at scale. And people in the industry just use Sun Noodle.”

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### Japanese pizza

Okonomiyaki (\$15), a savory Japanese pancake, is often gluey, but Regan and her crew learned that grating sweet potato into the mix cuts down on flour and potential

sogginess, resulting in a perfect cloud-like pancake. Topped with pickled ginger and wispy curls of cured tuna, each bite was a lovely mix of acidity, sweetness and smoke.

Oysters topped with tiny edible flowers glistened with rice wine mignonette (\$13), and each mouthful delivered a delightful dance of floral honey, acid and brine. As I ate the oysters, Ol' Dirty Bastard's “Shimmy Shimmy Ya” played over the restaurant's speakers. Though I'm pretty sure ODB meant something different when he croaked, “Yeah, baby, I like it raw,” this lyric is pretty appropriate for downing oysters.