



Luxury Chinese

INTRO DIM SUM IS MOSTLY SINGLE-NOTE

By Michael Nigrant | FOR REDEYE

Despite pimping black truffle-stuffed pasta or whiskey cocktails infused with bacon, most chefs don't crave the things they purvey at their restaurants. After years of reporting, I've found a chef's desert island meal is more like a Miller High Life and a piece of fried chicken.

But for years, as chefs layered black truffle under the skin of poulet de Bresse (France's famed blue foot chickens) and wrapped the poultry and steamed its delicate flesh inside a pig's bladder (I'm not drunk. Google it!), they hid their love of street food like a heroin habit. But then they woke up, realized doing things they didn't love for people they didn't like was stupid.

And that's pretty much why we now have so many nouveau doughnut shacks, cheap ramen counters, cheffy-takes on Chinese and upscale banh mi. Chefs started cooking what they loved and ate after breaking their backs on the line.

"Back in the day, I always said if you were looking for all the members of the Chicago food community, just go to San Soo Gab San (Korean restaurant) at 2 a.m.,"

said Sue Kim, managing partner for Lettuce Entertain You's Naoli and Intro restaurants. "Asian or Chinese food is comfort food for us (chefs and restaurateurs), and Americans in general. That's how the idea for Intro Dim Sum got started."

Intro is meant to be chef-driven with no enforcement of authenticity, aided by the thought that instead of making cheap dishes, the Intro crew could use the old sensibility of glamming things up with truffles and foie gras and lobster.

Food critics, despite chefs thinking of us as a lower subspecies, are very much like chefs, and we also dig Asian food. And though I worship the pedestrian McDonald's chicken nugget, I also believe that "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." So suffice it to say, Intro, chef-

REVIEW
Intro Dim Sum
 2300 N. Lincoln Park W.
 773-868-0002



driven Chinese infused with luxury ingredients, seemed built for people like me.

But apparently not.

The dining room of Intro is filled with cliché red lanterns, hanging bamboo steamers and other Chinese tchotchkes. It's not that you can't use clichés. Won Fun uses red lanterns, but 280 of them to create an arresting repeating visual that complements their general punk rock bordello vibe. At Intro, the mash-up of elegant artifacts from former architects of the space and cheap Chinese bric-a-brac reminds me of the cheesy spectacle that might ensue if a Gold Coast socialite sent her assistant down to Chinatown to pick up some things to decorate the penthouse for an impromptu Chinese New Year's party.

That being said, there is no doubting the elegance and refinement of chef Stephen Gillanders' black truffle egg drop soup. A clarified chicken consommé infused with shaved black winter truffle, sherry, kombu, fermented mushroom and gossamer threads of egg yolk was so tasty that after the first sip, I discarded the spoon and threw my head back and took the whole thing like a shot of Fireball. The soup also had some truffle oil, which lately has come under fire. Anthony Bourdain recently said truffle oil is about as edible as Astroglyde. Maybe it's because I was raised on the artificial fragrances and flavors created by New Jersey Turnpike chemists, but I keep a bottle of truffle oil at the ready for perking up my own dishes like waffle-ironed tater tots clad in Parmigiano-Reggiano snow or simple scrambled eggs.

Anyway, these things change. Avocado was once reviled for its fattiness, and now you apparently can't eat toast without it. The soup was so good, I contemplated buying a hot tub and filling it with this soup. The only problem was I only ordered one bowl and when the waiter brought out two, I thought it was a nice service gesture that he split the portion for our party. Only later did I find he charged us for two bowls unbidden.

Beijing duck fried rice (\$14.95) featured a crisp basmati that reminded me of the crunchy bits you usually find on the bottom of a great paella or the clay bowl of a Korean bibimbap.

A salad (\$4.95) of wispy cucumber discs fanned in to an elongated oval looked like a lime-green-trimmed surfboard turned on its side skimming sun-bronzed ocean wake. That wake was a sweet, sour and spicy vinaigrette of soy, sugar, rice wine vinegar, chili flake and sesame. It had a delightful addictive brightness that another dish, the so-called eight treasure Chinese broccoli salad (\$6.95) did not. I say "so-called" because by my count, and also because I would never count broccolini as any kind of revered booty, only had one treasure: crystallized mustard bits. I only ordered it because the server raved about it. I don't know if my server had come off the meat heavy Atkins diet and was having a nostalgic fever dream for vegetables, but the cold, unseasoned broccolini needed a splash of



First page: Roast duck at Intro Dim Sum. Second Page, clockwise: Curry noodles, ribs, shrimp lollipops. Intro is meant to be chef-driven Chinese infused with luxury ingredients.

acidity. Its excess roughage prevented me from getting to the addictive chewy bits of sugary Chinese mustard condiment candy at the bottom of the plate.

You'd think fried chicken stuffed bao (\$9.95) would be a carb-tastic wonderland, but the chicken had a fishy taste from the fry oil and texturally ate more like a boxed chicken tender than a Harold's wing fresh from the fryer.

Tender lobster nubbins (\$11.95) enrobed in silky dumpling wrappers glistened with jade butter, a bracing fresh lime and herb-

spiked sauce. Some seafood did not fare as well. Shrimp "lollipops" (\$8.85) featured a leaden breading that sloughed off after a couple of bites. A caramel-lacquered short rib was chewy and was a touch cloying.

Mitigating some of the savory misses was a maple soy panna cotta (\$5.95). So much panna cotta these days jiggles like collagen-infused lips, so I love that the Intro crew made theirs soft and pudding-like. Plus, then they gilded it with a crunchy contrast of honeycomb and sunflower seeds.

Bottom line

There are some luxurious gems served at Intro. But the fare at other gourmet Chinese spots like Stephanie Izard's Duck Duck Goat or Won Fun have flavors that are searing, puckering, boldly assertive and balanced, and so much on offer at Intro was just rich, single-noted or unrefined.

Michael Nagrant is a RedEye freelancer. Reporters visit restaurants unannounced and meals are paid for by RedEye.