

LUCKY PLATES

Chinatown champion Tony Hu brings authentic Chinese fare to River North

By Michael Nagrant

FOR REDEYE

The mission for Lao 18, the new restaurant from Chicago's regional Chinese cooking master, chef Tony Hu, is simple: "I want to bring Chinatown downtown."

And with Lao 18, Hu's 11th restaurant, that's exactly what he's doing. River North's Hubbard Street corridor is known for many things: free-flowing cocktails, drunken walks in perilously high heels and tipsy bachelorette parties singing rousing piano bar choruses of "Livin' on a Prayer." And, although I hear El Hefe Super Macho Taqueria, across the street from Lao 18, makes a killer elote dip, Hubbard has never been a destination for those in search of Chicago's very best authentic eats. By offering a distillation of the best offerings of Hu's other Chinese restaurants, including the chili-spiked fare of Lao Sze Chuan, the excellent dim sum of Lao Beijing, and more stylized interior at Lao Ma La, Lao 18 bucks that trend. While his Chinatown locations mostly attract hardcore foodies and Chinese folks, the mix at Lao 18 attracts an interesting assortment of moneyed, older Gold Coasters, dudes getting their pre-club grub on, gourmands in the know and Mag Mile tourists.

Chicken crack is not whack

They say weed is the gateway drug to bigger and badder things. Lao 18 is the restaurant version of that. It starts newbies out slowly,

Lao 18
18 W. Hubbard St.
312-955-8018



Heating up



Chinese doughnuts

offering familiar dishes such as crab rangoon (\$5) (which actually isn't Chinese, but American, popularized by tiki bar Trader Vic's) and sesame chicken (\$14) and transitions diners in to more adventurous, signature offerings such as Tony's Three Chili Chicken (\$15). In foodie circles, Tony's chicken has a street name: chicken crack. On this particular block of Hubbard, the goods are very addictive. Bits of juicy, luscious wok-fried chicken are coated in a crust so cracklin' that it doesn't wilt under a sauce of lip-tingling jalapenos, dry red chilis, sweet rosemary-perfumed simple syrup and a drizzle of sesame oil. My friend and I attacked this plate, jousting each other with our chopsticks for every last morsel. Before we left, my friend ordered a second take-out helping of "chicken crack"



Tony's Three Chili Chicken
KAITLYN MCQUAID PHOTOS FOR REDEYE

to eat for breakfast the next day.

The exotic meats are offal-ly good

If you scoff at the chili spice in Tony's chicken, don't worry. Hu has come to play. He pulls very few punches at Lao 18, saying, "Many of my customers know my food in Chinatown and have certain expectations. I want to honor that." Those expectations that Hu speaks of are aggressively spiced regional Chinese dishes that often include cuts of meat (tendon for example) or exotic vegetables (funky mountain mushrooms from China's Yunnan province) that many Westerners don't regularly eat. Hu honors this in spades with Szechuan beef and tripe, tender skeins of beef shank (the same cut

used in osso bucco) and thin strips of bible tripe (\$8), aka cow's stomach, tossed in a fiery pepper oil featuring the licorice tones of star anise. If the chicken is lip-tingling, the tripe is tongue-searing. After a few bites, sweat likely will bead on your forehead and your body will hum with an oddly soothing chili buzz known as a capsaicin high.

Ready for this jelly?

Then again, with Anthony Bourdain and Andrew Zimmern (of "Bizarre Foods") preaching the gospel of organ consumption, even tripe-eating is a bit pedestrian. I bet you haven't had Shanghai jellyfish (\$11). Don't worry, no one's gonna have to pee on you after you eat it. The stinging tentacles are removed, and it's the dome-like body known



Black pepper tenderloin



Salt and pepper shrimp

MORE ON LAO 18

What's new?

While most of the dishes at Lao 18 can be found at Hu's other spots, Hu says the Szechuan peppercorn sole fillet (\$19), tangles of golden-fried fish tossed with fiery pink peppercorns, ginger and garlic, is a new dish served only here.

What's next?

Conspicuously absent from the Lao 18 menu are Hu's famous hot pots, bubbling soups in which you cook vegetables, dumplings, meats and seafood tableside, similar to fondue. Hu says he plans to launch a sidewalk seating area along Hubbard Street with hot pot service later this summer. He also said he thinks his next Lao restaurant after Lao 18 will be focused on serving traditional Peking duck service.

Feeling lucky?

After dining at Lao 18, don't forget to stop at the corner store for a lottery ticket. While the name of the restaurant is a nod to Tony's "Lao" family of restaurants and the address of the new location (18 W. Hubbard St.), Hu said that 18 also is one of the luckiest numbers in China and that the name Lao translates as "always" while the number 18 represents luck. Hu says the name of the restaurant really means "always be lucky."

as the "bell" that's sliced into thin strips, then boiled, chilled and tossed with scallion batons and wisps of carrot. The jellyfish strips offer a chewy cellophane noodle-like contrast to the crunchy scallion and carrot. If the thought of eating stinging sea creatures makes you cringe, stick with the plump, briny curls of salt and pepper shrimp (\$16) tossed with a confetti-dice of jalapeno and red pepper and showered with Chinese five-spice powder. The dish wafts a heady mix of cinnamon and clove.

Service is mostly just a smile

With the choice to order the salt and pepper shrimp with the shells on or off, I went with on; I love the salty potato chip-like fried shell. Unfortunately, they arrived at the table

shell-off. While our server was friendly, when I asked her why they serve Japanese sake at a Chinese restaurant, she grimaced, paused for a long time and then finally said, "I think they serve it in China too." (Hu later clarified that while sake is Japanese, it's one of the few alcohols that pairs well with Asian flavors. The Dewazakura Oka (\$12) has nice cherry, pear and flower notes.) My server also had a tough time telling us which dishes were exclusive to Lao 18 and which were served at Hu's other restaurants—and also didn't know many of the ingredients in the dishes. The manager did alleviate some of this knowledge gap by visiting tables throughout the night.

What's with the birdcages?

I was too busy beholding the room to care

too much about the service glitches anyway. The build-out at Lao 18, including a pair of huge blue and white porcelain rice bowls suspended from the ceiling sprouting black support beams that look like chopsticks, is one of the most intricate in the Lao empire. The swirling orange mural behind the bar depicting mountains and clouds isn't just a pretty picture. "White clouds represent peacefulness and good luck," Hu said. "We want Lao 18 to feel like a spot of peace." The birdcages hanging over the banquettes aren't just cool, funky light fixtures, but they too have a symbolic meaning. "In China, there is a saying that money is nothing, that [real] wealth is having the time to enjoy the money. People here [in America] care about dogs and cats. In China, we love birds," Hu said. "Caring for a

bird takes time. If you have the time to tend to a bird, you are wealthy. The birdcages at Lao 18 represent leisure time and the idea of eating at home with family and friends."

The bottom line

If you can only dine at one of Tony Hu's Lao restaurants or you're just trying to decide where to begin, Lao 18, which showcases the very best dishes (and some of the most authentic) from his empire in a very glamorous setting, is the place to start.

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