

Mini-review: Mott St
1401 N. Ashland Ave. 773-687-9977

!!!! Off to a good start

Crab brain fried rice
HILARY HIGGINS/REDEYE PHOTOS

How does the second restaurant from the owners of Ruxbin stack up?

flavor fave

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

When chef Edward Kim and his partners Vicki Kim (his sister) and Jenny Kim (no relation) opened Asian-French-Latin mashup Ruxbin in Noble Square, Chicago got that once-in-a-blue moon restaurant. It was a very personal venture serving kimchi- and Oaxacan cheese-stuffed empanadas and soy gelee with horseradish granita amidst repurposed church pews, and diners went crazy for it. I wondered, with their second effort—Mott St, an Asian night market-inspired spot just a few blocks north—would they rise above again?

The scene: Just like Ruxbin, with its decoupage-cookbook-page ceiling and seatbelt-lined booths, Mott St is an exercise in well-curated interior design. There's an undulating chandelier woven from reeds that channels the skeleton of a swimming fish. A communal seating area outfitted with woven wire storage cabinets makes the space feel like an army commissary as imagined by Urban Outfitters.

The food: Apologies for referencing Guy Fieri, but chef Edward Kim will take you down to flavortown. His food is bold and punchy. The soulful, brothy miso soup (\$8) brimmed with the sour funk of dried anchovies. Crispy, tiny deep-fried egg rolls (\$9) stuffed with fluffy, juicy basil-flecked pork come with a dip that burst with fish sauce and mint. Though the big flavors are indisputable, Kim's style is tough to pin down. The menu is full of Japanese (soba, udon), Korean (kimchi) and Latin influences (escabeche, chimichurri). Tres leches cake (\$8) weeps with condensed milk. The comforting, rich crab brain fried rice (\$10)—the bits of brain taste like smoky bacon lardons—channels the Kims' childhood. Vicki Kim said, "Eating blue crabs with family and our parents, [we] would always take rice and mix it in the crab's top shell to get the 'mustard' [crab brains]." There's even a nod to India with the cilantro-topped Harry's Butter Thighs (\$12), a take on chicken makhani, a butter curry dish from Punjab that's named for chef de partie Harin Gupta, aka Harry. If anything was a letdown, it's the American-influenced whiskey-marinated pork neck (\$13), which was slightly dry, a little tough and devoid of whiskey flavor.

The drinks: Any dryness in the pork is cured by Mott's cocktails. While Ruxbin was BYOB, it showed promise in the drinks department with spikeable sodas featuring flavors such as tamarind, vanilla and poppy seed. Equipped with a liquor license at Mott St, bar manager Chad Hauge (formerly of Longman & Eagle) has a handful of set cocktails but whips up at least one seasonal drink special daily. I really dug the Summer Storms (\$8) made with tequila, cucumber, green tea, bird's eye chili syrup, lime and fiery ginger-spiked tapioca bubbles. It felt like drinking the essence of a spring garden drizzled with cooling rain.

The patio: With the new negroni slushie-serving Parson's Chicken & Fish and the goat-illuminated rooftop at Little Goat, 2013 is turning out to be the summer of gourmet patio dining. Strengthening that trend is Mott St's spacious deck tricked out with Edison bulb string lights and a tall graffiti-splashed privacy fence. Even when an inevitable blizzard shuts down the outdoor space, Mott St still will be the place for the Logan Square bike mafia and West Town preppy professionals who inhabit the patio now. Because there's so much attention to design, I wondered if the fence graffiti was faux. "It's real," Vicki Kim said. "Chef [Edward Kim] once hopped the fence and scared away a tagger. ... We try to remove it, but it keeps getting tagged."

The service: Servers are a little breathless and overbearing. Everything is described as "fun" or "fantastic." My server did warn me that dishes would come out as they were ready, but that didn't make it any less of a shame when a bunch of plates arrive at once, with some getting cold while I ate others. When I finished my meal, I felt like I was getting a death stare to leave.

Bottom line: The Mott St crew avoids the dreaded sophomore slump by serving up another deeply personal restaurant focused on big flavors, bracing cocktails and cool-kid ambience.

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Harry's Butter Thighs