

Clockwise from top left: River North Bacon Dog, Hot Turkey Roll Wrap, Five Spiced Duck, Angry Reuben and the Chilly Willy

HILARY HIGGINS/REDEYE PHOTOS

BELOVED MEAT TAKES A STARRING ROLE AT NEW SANDWICH SHOP

BETTER WITH BACON?

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

Chef David Burke (of Primehouse and many New York-based restaurants) is the P.T. Barnum of chefs. As evidenced by his current survival on "Top Chef Masters," Burke is a great cook, but he's an even better storyteller. The first time I ever met him, he asked if he could see my hand. I was a little confused; I hardly knew the guy, but he looked like he was about to propose. Then he whipped out what looked like a perfume mister, spritzed my wrist and said, "Smell that!" It was the unmistakable essence of bacon, courtesy of his newest line of flavor sprays. As the inventor of edible bacon perfume, it was only a matter of time before he opened Burke's Bacon Bar (with Primehouse's Rick Gresh as executive chef), the one sandwich shop that could finally prove the axiom that bacon makes everything better. I stopped in to see if indeed it does.

The scene: There were bouncers with clipboards and a rope line. I stood in it. But, it turned out that I gave bacon too much credit: The line was for the new cocktail bar Jimmy, which is hidden behind a secret door located in the lobby of Burke's. This was confusing; bacon definitely deserves its own velvet rope. Instead, it gets a tiny kitchen lined with gleaming white subway tile fronted by a maple butcher-block counter. Like Al's Beef on Taylor Street, the dining room, which features a single, small elbow-height counter, is standing room only. There is a backlit display case featuring a glistening headless duck carcass, mahogany slabs of country bacon and a few cans of Spam hanging on hooks behind the counter. Step outside and you can perch on the stone planters in front or claim a table up the block next to the James Hotel.

Sandwich gripes: With nine sandwiches priced at \$4 apiece or three for \$11 (they're dubbed "handwiches" by Burke because they're the size of your palm, with about three making a meal), I was tempted, as I am when I'm drunk at Taco Bell at midnight, to order the whole menu. I did. I should have been more judicious. The smoked eggplant meatball parmesan was sogged down by a mess of aioli and the banh mi featured a baby food-like mush of chicken liver-bacon salad. The beef and cheddar sandwich featured tender, rich skeins of braised beef, but

Burke's Bacon Bar

610 N. Rush St.
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the cheddar flavor was smothered under drippy steak-sauce mayo and limp fried onions.

Sandwich likes: I'm glad I ordered the River North Bacon Dog, a jalapeño-bacon jam-slathered bacon sausage topped with sport peppers, relish, celery salt, tomato and mustard. It may be the best Chicago-style salad dog around. Another sandwich of five-spice duck slathered in sweet hoisin stuffed in a cloud-like bao and sprinkled with cucumber and cilantro was righteous. The Angry Reuben was solid, but should probably be renamed the Sorta Miffed Reuben, as the chili pepper vodka-soaked sauerkraut nestled on top of peppery pastrami was only slightly spicy. The micro-slices of marble rye are, however, cuter than kittens.

Beyond sandwiches: Burke's offers a few salads; the glass noodle salad with five-spice duck (\$7.50) that I tried was similar to what you'd find at your average Thai takeout spot. In the dessert department, Burke's served a magnificent flurry of **whiskey-soaked cherries and chocolate shavings swimming in vanilla soft serve**. It was a beautiful blizzard of bitterness, hot spice and sweet cream (\$4.50). The bacon peanut brittle (\$5) was an addictive, glossy cluster of crunchy candied nuts and the bacon cookie was larded with bits of bacon fat and oozy chocolate chips (\$2.25).

Bottom line: The desserts and the killer bacon dog are so good that Burke's should draw a line down the block like Hot Doug's; however, the masses probably won't gather until the cooks use a lighter hand with the sauces and maybe even edit out a few of the weaker sandwiches.

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