



Asia Major!

The West Loop's Embeya combines the best Asian cuisines in one chic spot.

| By Michael Nigrant |
| Photography by Anthony Tahlier |

There was a lot of liquor. Lots. And how could there not be? The beautiful marble-topped bar and the fiery Sato Zuke cocktail (made with ginger beer, gin and lime) beckoned. But my spirited high was not so much the alcohol talking, but a result of discovering a restaurant that serves the kind of fusion cuisine that

doesn't compromise on flavor. At Embeya, the West Loop's newest arrival, there's a strong Vietnamese and Thai focus, but there are also elements of Chinese and Japanese cooking. Embeya is pan-Asian, but not in that cheesy, surface-skimming, Americanized way. Rather, there's a depth and commitment to each cuisine.

I suppose part of my fervor comes from being surprised. After doing this job for years, I've gotten pretty good at imagining what I'm in for when I walk in the door. But for some reason I'd imagined Embeya as a tiny storefront, a scrappy realization CONTINUED...



ASIAN INVASION Left: The main dining room at Embeya. Above: Sea snails with pork, lemongrass and black garlic

Embeya

564 W Randolph St.
312.612.5640

Open for dinner nightly

Small plates \$8-\$16
Large plates \$15-\$36
Desserts \$6

What to Eat

Green papaya salad, sea snails, baby clams, ribs

Five-Star

Chef Thai Dang worked at L20 and Ria, which earned three and two Michelin stars respectively.

All in the Family

Dang's mom was quite the culinary inspiration; the Embeya blog describes her this way: "Picture a woman ... standing roughly 5'-1" ... This petite woman climbs on a step stool with the longest ladle known to man to cook, stew, and grill for... an army."

Bespoke Toque

Dang's custom white chef's jackets were secured by his uncle Calvin Tran of the Halsted women's clothing boutique of the same name.

Sunday Dinner

On Sunday the Embeya crew serves a seven-course prix-fixe feast for \$29.



BOWLED OVER
From top to bottom:
Green papaya salad
with crispy shallots;
the bar area at
Embeya; light
fixtures inspired by
sea anemone



Big restaurants like Embeya usually suffer from the occasional mistake in execution, but each plate is perfect and demolished in seconds flat.

...CONTINUED of a dream for a young cook, chef Thai Dang, who came up at some of Chicago's best spots (L20, Ria), and his business partner, Attila Gyulai, the former vice president of operations at the Elysian Hotel.

Instead I found a palace full of dark bamboo columns, hand-carved wood screens, gray banquettes and emerald green Venetian plastered walls. Sea anemone-inspired chandeliers float overhead. There's a crackle, a boisterous burst and a buzz from the patrons, a mix of socialites, headphone-wearing hipsters and foodies, clinking glasses and clanking plates.

The menu is fairly straightforward—a blend of hot and cold small plates, large plates, and sides of vegetables and rice. But don't let its simplicity fool you—there are plenty of standouts lurking in that concise list.

Squid is stuffed with silky bone marrow and pork and cut in glistening slices. It's dusted with pearls of finger lime (a citrus fruit with caviar-like flesh), spiked with chili and garlic, and adorned with scallions. The squid is delicate and firm; the bone marrow melting. To achieve such contrasting texture without compromising either protein takes incredible technique.

Next, I scoop up lime-soaked, chopped baby clams with wispy rice crackers. The salad of citrus-bursting papaya comes tossed with tender cracklin' bits of housemade beef jerky. Lime-coated pieces of banana blossom are fortified with shavings of Thai chili. Both of these salads are as good as anything you'd get at a really good Thai or Vietnamese joint, but more elegant and precisely balanced.

And then I wait and wait. The dream does not come crashing down, but is temporarily halted by sloppy pacing after that first breathless burst of small plates.

But a restaurant is not only judged by what it doesn't do, but what it does when it fails at first.

Our waiter, recognizing my table's agonizing wait, comps us a round of wine. As I am on the fence about another, my waiter doesn't hesitate and brings a sample of grapefruit-perfumed Max Ferd Riesling. While I sip and decide, he tells me about the estate's 40-year-old vines and something about mineral expression. I'm pretty sure he'd do well on the master sommelier exam.

There isn't much time for reverie; a delightful small plate of sea snails stuffed with pork arrives next. Wooden sticks protrude from mini conch-shaped shells. Pulling them out yields an escargot lollipop that I douse with a sweet lemongrass broth.

I chase that with a large plate of sticky hoisin- and tamarind-glazed pork ribs, which have a satisfying chew all the way to bone. I keep my fingers working over mahogany-colored, crispy-skinned garlic chicken. A side of young bamboo lacquered in sake and showered with chives is tender and sweet. (I'd never been jealous of pandas, but now I know why they look so darn delightful.) The chopped maitake mushrooms in the bowl are truffle-like and emanate a heady earthy funk.

The open kitchen at Embeya affords a view of what seems like a football team's worth of cooks in chef whites. It's an interesting contrast, the calm of that kitchen against the constant demand of ravenous diners just feet away. Big restaurants like Embeya usually suffer the occasional mistake in execution, but each plate is perfect and demolished in seconds flat.

Dessert, a bowl of lychees in raspberry-like shells and gooey rambutans bursting from their hairy skin look downright frightening. Serving unfamiliar tropical fruits like this is courageous. Although with dinner being fairly light, I almost wish for a rich dessert cliché like a lava cake. I settle for a jiggy tofu crème caramel topped with candied citrus zest instead. While I'm not smitten by dessert, I'm swooning over the experience.

The name Embeya is a nod to Dang's childhood nickname (he's the youngest of 10), "em be" which translates from Vietnamese as "the little one." Thinking about that, I just shake my head, for there is nothing little about Embeya. It will, I hope, loom large, like my buzz from this experience, for a very long time. ■

