



Red Hot tamale.



Jim Shoe tamale.



Ribs at The Delta.

Delta new

THE DELTA WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE WITH ITS TAMALES

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

*Well my home's in the Delta,
Way out on that farmer's road.
Now you know I'm living in Chicago,
And people, I sure do hate to go.*

—Muddy Waters, “My Home is in the Delta”

That lyric from Waters is a bit of an idle threat. It was recorded in 1963, but Waters stayed in Chicagoland, dying in his Westmont, Illinois home in 1983. Still, when you listen to the recording, you can hear Waters' homesickness.

Eldridge Williams, owner of The Delta, a new Wicker Park restaurant specializing in the cuisine and soul of the Delta, knows that feeling all too well. Raised in Mississippi, but working in restaurants in Chicago, he longed for the tamales of his Memphis youth.

“I remember I was 5 or 6 years old, my dad worked for El Terrifico tamales,” Williams said. “He'd take me to work where he'd box them up. I'd sit on conveyer and eat them warm.”

Williams grabbed his future chef Adam Wendt and some business partners,

jumped in a Ford Expedition and toured the Delta with his crew. Inspired, they

came back to Chicago to open the restaurant. **REVIEW**
The Delta
1745 W. North Ave.
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Wendt knew tamales would be the foundation of the menu, so he experimented with recipes before they took the trip.

“They were all wrong,” Wendt said. “When we were traveling, we tasted a ton of them. We asked people how they made them, discovering that they're not steamed, but stewed in spicy tomato broth. But no one would really tell us their secrets, so I had to taste and figure it out.”

After cooking “about 75 to 100 batches” Wendt figured it out.

“I tasted it and I knew,” Williams said. “The funny thing is (Wendt) won't tell me the recipe.”

It feels right that their origin remains a mystery. They're ethereal. Unlike many of the gritty masa-based tamales moldering

away in a red Igloo cooler that drunken you has probably tasted, Wendt's are airy, filled with "cush," which is not a California strain of weed, but highly seasoned corn meal.

They're overflowing with silky lamb and beef, topped nacho style with spicy giardiniera and drizzled with D.A.F sauce, an elixir Wendt describes as "slutty." It's like creamy Thousand Island dressing. This plate is called the Jim Shoe (\$11), an upscale homage to a native South Side Chicago sandwich. You can get the tamales prepared many other ways, but the shoe was my jam.

Speaking of D.A.F, if you hadn't figured it out, that's a shortened version the phrase "Delta as f---."

"You see an old guy in a rocking chair on his porch drinking sweet tea, or a beat up old pickup in the south and people say that's D.A.F. It's an attitude," Williams said.

The Delta feel fills the space in the forms of photos, tufted cotton plants and Mason jars stuffed with flickering candles. Near the bar, there are thrift store-salvaged letters tricked out with thick light bulbs spelling out D.A.F. Copper panels adorn the kitchen pass and glazed ceramic tiles hang on the wall while a group of pig figurines hold court. It's a maelstrom of antebellum mansion finery and junkyard-chic.

Something about the place makes you want to get down, down deep in the bowl of thick braised greens wafting heady spice—greens that flare your nostrils with a vinegar tang (\$8).

If that brew doesn't do it, then a couple of Rock's Red-light cocktails (\$11), a bitter sweet mix of Campari and rum lightened by bracing mint will do the trick. And if you still need to loosen up, there's a selection of "vases," or large format cocktails served in thrift store-salvaged flower vases, the brainchild of partner Adam Kamin. As you look around the room, you'll see people Lady in the Tramping it, staring deeply into each other's eyes while sucking from the pair of straws protruding from the huge glass bowl.

Speaking of tang, there is the burger (\$15). I'm worried you may think of me as Chicken Little, because recently, I declared the Flip burger one of Chicago's best. Well, The Delta's is also one of Chicago's best. It is better than Flip's burger. Made from 40-day dry-aged beef, it's so rich and funky, it tastes like someone stuffed a whole lobe of seared foie gras in the middle.

Generally, Memphis-style ribs are dry rubbed so heavily, you feel like you're eating kitty litter. While Wendt dry rubs and brines his babybacks (\$16), he smokes and braises them, and finishes them on the grill until they glisten with a sherry caramel and the blazing bite of paprika and chili powder.

Fried chicken (\$16) is a whole bird, sous vide cooked so the interior is super juicy, fried to a mahogany brown, and sprinkled with fat flaky salt crystals. The crust is fried a little too hard to my liking, but if you like thick double or triple dredged flour-coated fried birds, you'll be all right with this.



Burger at The Delta.

Not everything here is heavy. The catfish bursting with coriander and glistening in lemon butter is cloud-light. It's sourced from a third-generation catfish farmer who Williams and Wendt found via a woman they met at a bar on their research trip.

The only thing that doesn't really work is dessert. Beignets are mushy and topped

with peach preserves. A cobbler has an undercooked crust. Both of them are S.A.F, soggy as ... well you know what I mean.

Bottom Line

The Delta will change your life with tamales and one of Chicago's best burgers. Even if you're not really hungry, the front

bar is probably one of Chicago's chilliest hangs right now.

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