



diningout

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The Gin N' Tonic is infused with sweet Thai basil, calamansi orange and nicely bittersweet Fevertree tonic water.

Fat Rice blends Portuguese, Macau flavors into delicious mix

On a dark corner in a scrappy part of town, located across from a gas station and an old Mexican supermarket, a bright light shines. This bit of illumination is Fat Rice, a new noodle, dumpling and rice shack from the proprietors of the former underground dining collective X-Marx that mingles the flavors of Macau and Portugal.

Until now, neither cuisine has been represented very well in Chicago. And with seemingly either a neo-retro-gourmet diner or a modern-rustic Italian restaurant opening every five minutes, such originality alone is a beacon of hope for Chicago's continuing culinary evolution.

Like the culinary focus, the aesthetic at Fat Rice, run by Adrienne Lo and Abraham Conlon, is also fairly unique. It's a sort of Chinese grandma's kitchen meets Logan Square

hipster bar.

My admiration for Fat Rice doesn't come so much from its uniqueness or its off-the-beaten-path vibe, but rather from its fearless pursuit of rustic presentations and authentic (by which I mean unfamiliar to Westerners) ingredients.

In some ways, Fat Rice, which dabbles in pig tongue, sour cabbage and wintermelon, is as hardcore as anything you'd find deep in Chinatown.

The appetizer bite of piggy tongue is Sichuanese, but there is very little salt or spice here. The hot fermented cabbage appetizer compensates for the lackluster tongue with fizzy fla-



Chef Abraham Conlon



The potstickers at Fat Rice restaurant are unique in style and texture and full of flavor. | AL PODGORSKI-CHICAGO SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

vor and a snappy crisp texture. While the fleshy wintermelon is unfamiliar, it floats in a deeply comforting broth reminiscent of a schmaltz-bombed chicken soup topped with thick planks of smoky bacon and crusty hand-ripped buttery croutons.

Not everything at Fat Rice is unfamiliar. Those who've had a "garbage" salad at the local steakhouses would be somewhat familiar with Fat Rice's *salada*

gordo — a mound of charred padron peppers, chunky hard-boiled egg, onion, candied nuts and rosy strips of salty-rich Jamon Iberico. Where a garbage salad is usually smothered with a flavor-killing ranch or blue cheese, the *salada gordo* is lightly dressed with a slightly sticky mango chutney port vinaigrette that has a nice acidity.

Perhaps the most familiar thing on the menu, a batch of

shrimp and pork-stuffed potstickers, is the most unrecognizable. Most of us have suffered far too many over-steamed dumplings wrinkled within an inch of their lives and stuffed with tasteless gummy shrimp. The ones at Fat Rice are upended from their cooking pan and flipped upside down on the plate. They possess a dual crunch, one from the rich caramelized dumpling crust

and another from a lacy tiara of the dehydrated and dried salted seasoning liquid used to unstick the dumplings from the pan. The wrappers are delicate and the shrimp inside is moist, but not chewy. The black vinegar dipping sauce, mixed with a chili spice and scallion served on the side, is a nice tangy foil.

My table is mostly serviced by ninja-like food runners who drop plates and run without a word.



The rice crisp dessert is a surprising and satisfying sweet and salty mix.

FAT RICE ★★

2957 W. Diversey, (773) 661-9170; eatfatrice.com

Hours: Tuesday to Saturday 6-10 p.m.;

Prices: Pickles and snacks: \$4; appetizers: \$5-\$14; wok and casserole (Clay Pot) items: \$8-\$34; dessert: \$6-\$8

Try: Potstickers, cauliflower claypot, and rice crisp

In a bite: A Portuguese/Macanesse fusion spot serving comforting spicy authentic noodles, dumplings and rice bowls.

KEY: ★★★★★ Extraordinary; ★★★★★ Excellent; ★★ Very Good; ★ Good; Zero stars: Poor

When we can get a hold of him, our server is enthusiastic and full of recommendations, though many of them are misguided.

He claims one of his favorite cocktails (from the limited and focused drink menu) is the Calan Club, a mix of rum, tamarind vinegar, vanilla and star anise. It ends up tasting mostly like unmixed club soda. The real star quaff is the Gin N' Tonic, infused with sweet Thai basil, calamansi orange and nicely bittersweet Fevertree tonic water.

Our server also claims the African Chicken is the way to



The *salada gordo* is lightly dressed with slightly sticky mango chutney port vinaigrette.



Fat Rice's cauliflower clay pot is a vegetarian dream stew that can also satisfy a carnivore.

go, but the night he recommends it, the meat, while flavored with a nice smoke, is also dry and dusty. To his credit, on a second visit, I order it again and the

meat was succulent.

Though he does not recommend it, I know I must have the house-special fat rice, a bowl brimming with a crunchy and



The interior of Fat Rice restaurant at 2957 W. Diversey is colorful and inviting. | AL PODGORSKI-CHICAGO SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

soft mix of rice, plump head-on prawns, fatty wafers of grilled linguica sausage, clams in the shell and plump hunks of pork belly. One of the clams is a bit fishy, and after a while it's a chore to spit out the unpitted olives and cut the humongous pickled tomatoes and whole peppers also tossed in the mix.

Much better is the clay cauliflower, a sweet-spiced curry also filled with pumpkin, al dente long beans and juicy okra served with fragrant coconut rice. Though it's clearly a vegetarian dream stew, the rich and starchy vegetables make this carnivore pretty happy too.

One recommendation from our server that's spot-on is the dessert, a rice crisp encrusted

with dried seaweed, sesame, pork jerky bits and cashews. Though it sounds like a Rice Krispies treat that's had an unfortunate head on collision with a maki roll, the combo is a surprising and satisfying sweet and salty mix.

Even though Fat Rice is not underground like Conlon's and Lo's original venture, X-Marx, hunkered down in the dark and bathed mostly by glinting candlelight while finishing up the last of the rice crisp, it does feel like I've discovered a great little secret.

Michael Nagrant is a local freelance writer. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.