



diningout

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THE REAL DEAL

Isla tempts with fresh Filipino fare

One of the great demands of reviewing restaurants is the overarching need to cover the new and the hip. In doing so, the places that have been executing something really good for so long often get overlooked. So for the next month or so, I'm dedicating myself to writing about good neighborhood places, the mom & pops and the small, authentic ethnic joints that get lost amid the pomp and circumstance of celebrity chefdom.

First up: Isla, one of the best Filipino joints in all of Chicago.

Filipino food isn't usually on the radar. Partly that's because Filipinos haven't had a TV standard bearer like Rick Bayless for Mexican or Mario Batali for Italian. Because there is no popular clamor, great Filipino cooking has been mostly a private enterprise confined to graduation parties and weddings.

The few places that have catered to the public have been cheap all-you-can-eat steam tables. That's not terrible. Certainly braises like Kare Kare or beef oxtails in peanut sauce or marinated pork adobo do well in that setting. But fresh, roasted fish,

crispy fried pork, and pancit noodles — the other cornerstones of Filipino cooking — suffer a gloppy, uninspiring fate at such operations.

Isla is one of the few spots that cooks to order, and that alone sets it apart. Because it is in a strip mall with a desperate parking situation, you can forgive many for missing it.

Though the Filipinos certainly aren't missing it. On any sleepy weeknight, Isla, outfitted with a bamboo divider shade, mod local art and righteous dinosaur-sized bits of fried goodies, is usually packed.

Certainly, everyone loves a good egg roll, and the lumpia shanghai on offer at Isla — thin, golden-fried cigars stuffed with pork, egg, jicama, and carrots and served with a sweet chili sauce — are some of the best egg rolls in town. I love Isla's so much that I tend to buy up a few hundred to serve at my annual Christmas party.

And once you've opened the floodgates, it's a pretty easy hop to Isla's *tocino*, a neon pink lacquered-cured pork that combines the best sweet/savory qualities of General Tso's sauce and bacon. Although, if



At the Filipino restaurant Isla, Tocino is a cured pork dish that combines the best sweet/savory qualities of General Tso's sauce and bacon. | BRIAN JACKSON-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

you're truly in the market for riffs on bacon, the *lechon kawali*, a pile of deep-fried pork belly with a cracklin' crust served with a side of thick, sweet gravy, is the thing.

Really there is no shortage of pork at Isla. If you're the kind of person who relishes those steroidal-looking turkey legs served among faux knights jousting at Renaissance fairs, you'll love the crispy *pata*, a humongous bone-in pork knuckle whose tender, crispy-skinned flesh puffs steam and dribbles juice when separated from the bone.

Though if you prefer chicken, the righteously high-piled plate of fried bird served with a sweet, banana-infused ketchup is one of the better poultry offerings this side of Popeye's. The mixed adobo — tender hunks of chicken and pork swimming in a zingy garlic, vinegar

and peppercorn gravy — is not as vinegary as the best versions I've had, but it's a decent representation of the Filipino staple.

If noodles are your thing, the *pancit bihon* — crispy rice noodles strewn with tender planks of roast chicken and shredded vegetables — is well-seasoned, unlike the *pancit palabok*, which is gummy noodles sogged down with a semi-congealed bland tofu sauce.

Grilled and marinated whole fish, such as Inihaw bangus or milkfish, is impressive, the kind of fear factor-inducing plate a TV food dude on the hunt for scary-looking eats would love. But it's the giant Jules Verne-worthy, char-grilled whole squid stuffed with onion and tomato that really gets my juices flowing. This plate features firm, but not chewy squid kissed with smoke and

a nice touch of salt.

Garlic fried rice at Isla has a nice sweet note, but it's not nearly as fluffy as the sublime garlic fried rice served over at Pecking Order.

Isla is BYOB, but they serve a nice assortment of fresh juices including a refreshing mango on ice. I really wanted the calamansi orange, but they were out. They were also out of the *loganisa*, or sweet Filipino sausages, on recent visits. Unfortunately, our server didn't tell us of these outages until we tried to order. I can forgive a kitchen for being out of something if the restaurant has the courtesy to tell you when delivering the menu. Getting to the ordering stage without a warning courts disappointment.

Asian restaurants are generally not known for their desserts, and Isla bucks this trend a bit with a

leche flan that avoids the usual conceit of being too wobbly with gelatin and is instead a rich, velvety sweet custard.

The *halo halo*, on the other hand, a parfait glass piled with shaved ice fruit, preserved beans and purple yam ice cream, is disappointing. My Filipino friends gush for it like most yearn for a hot fudge sundae, and they tell me Isla's is one of the better versions in town. I kinda dig the sugar-lacquered red beans swimming near the bottom, but having no nostalgic touchpoint for the cloying, syrupy, icy mess myself, it's one of the few things at Isla I can't quite fathom.

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



The Crispy Pata is a huge bone-in pork knuckle whose tender, crispy-skinned flesh puffs steam and dribbles juice when separated from the bone.



The Mixed Adobo includes tender hunks of chicken and pork swimming in a zingy garlic, vinegar and peppercorn gravy — a Filipino staple.



If you like a good egg roll, you'll love the Lumpia Shanghai, which are stuffed with pork, egg, jicama and carrots, and served with a sweet chili sauce.

ISLA ★★

2501 W. Lawrence,
Unit D, Chicago
(773) 271-2988;
islapilipina.com

Hours: 11 a.m.-9 p.m.
Tuesday-Saturday; 11
a.m.-7 p.m. Sunday.

Prices: Appetizers \$3-\$8;
noodles \$7-\$9; entrees
\$7-\$14; desserts \$4-\$5.

Try: Lumpia shanghai,
crispy pata, leche flan.

In a bite: One of the best
Filipino spots in Chicago,
serving up all kinds of
fried pork, comfort-
ing noodles and meaty
braises.

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