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WORTH A TRIP

LUMPIA SHANGHAI

Isla Pilipina Restaurant, 2501 W. Lawrence Ave. 773-271-2988

By Michael Nagrant | FORREDEYE

It's not so much a restaurant as it is a movement. When Ray Espiritu took over the Lincoln Square restaurant Isla Pilipina from his parents six years ago, it was very traditional, serving mostly ex-pat Filipinos. Fresh out of art school, Espiritu didn't just want to serve food; he wanted to elevate Filipino cuisine and culture in Chicago. He wanted to help the community and create something that was an extension of his personality. "Any business is a form of art," he said. "There's a vibration from our audience. We feed off that and want to serve them well."

Espiritu took a drab storefront sandwiched in between a Little Caesars and a tiny liquor store and brightened it up with sea-foam green paint, installed shiny new wood floors and comfy banquettes and put up scads of local art. Espiritu hand-illustrated the menu with stylized doodles, including a picture of a Filipino mom whom I always imagine scolding me to eat my vegetables.

While some Filipino spots let their food molder away in steam tables, Espiritu insisted on serving made-to-order dishes such as pancit (\$7), stir-fried noodles mixed with vegetables and often meat, and brontosaurus-sized crispy pata (\$15), deep-fried pork shanks with a richness that's nicely foiled by a vinegar-tinged dipping sauce. And chef Mario Nunez incorporated ingredients from local farms in to the restaurant's fare.

Visit most nights and Isla buzzes with the

energy of a hot late-night Chinatown restaurant. But instead of young Chinese students from UIC sopping up liquor on a Friday night drinking binge, there is a diverse group of young Filipinos, intrepid foodies and Lincoln Square families dining together.

The cornerstone of the Isla menu is the lumpia Shanghai. Pork, from a small farm in Indiana, and minced vegetables are wrapped in an eggroll-like wrapper (Isla imports these from the Philippines) and deep-fried until they emerge as mahogany-colored, oil-dappled, crispy cigar-shaped dumplings. They're somehow more addictive than a traditional Chinese eggroll, and though you'll be tempted to get the small order (10 for \$3), go for the large (20 for \$5). You'll eat them all.

Isla makes catering portions of these beauties as well. "They should replace vegetable trays and ranch dip," Espiritu said. "They should have them at Super Bowl parties." The restaurant makes 3,000 lumpia a day to keep up with demand. A couple years ago when I went to pick up a tray of 200 of the tasty rolls for a holiday shindig, Espiritu handed over the batch and said, "Here's your order of a million lumpia." All I could think was, "I wish he wasn't joking." I guarantee if he had given me that many, they would not have gone to waste.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE. REDEYE@TRIBUNE.COM | @REDEYEATRINK