



diningout

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COMING UP SHORT

Japanese eatery in Wicker Park lacking in many ways

People like to chirp about how Chicago dining is as good as New York City's. Sometimes it's better. Sometimes it isn't. Oiistar, a new Japanese noodle spot in Wicker Park, is trying to stake a claim for Chicago, but it still has a ways to go. For now, New York, with Ippudo and Momofuku, still wins the ramen restaurant battle.

The honeyed woods and the long row of counter seating outfitted with square, backless chairs at Oiistar, is almost a carbon copy of the decor at Momofuku noodle bar. The food and service at Oiistar is not.

Once seated at the bar it takes about 10 minutes for a server to bring a menu, and there's another long wait for her to take my order. Water glasses show up sometime after course one. That course, fried garlic chicken, also cools for at least five minutes before anyone notices we do not have flatware.

Servers spend a lot of time chatting near the bar rather than attending to guests. When my wife asks about a Riesling, the waitress warns that it's too sweet. She guides her instead to a Gewurztraminer that is also fairly syrupy.

You'd think sitting at the kitchen counter within feet of the line cooks would ameliorate this, that one of them would take pity and notice we are desperately in need of chopsticks, or that as our food sits waiting at the pass for missing servers,



The grilled spicy pork ribs are coated in sriracha, scallion and crispy shallots — some of the better non-smoked ribs in the city.

that they could hand the dishes over themselves? They do not. About every five minutes, executive chef Sunny Yim yells that there's a hot bowl of ramen ready for pick-up. Sometimes it gets picked up. Sometimes he has to repeat himself.

I understand his urgency. His noodles are made with a \$65,000 machine imported from Japan. He worked for five years on his "Oiimen" house ramen made with pork-backbone broth and filled with woody tree ear mushrooms, runny egg, lean pork loin, spicy chili oil and garlic. Unfortunately the noodles are

flimsy, lacking a satisfying spring. The broth needs salt, more body and some funk. The loin, while tender, is fairly flavorless and could be chicken. You can order a fattier cut of pork belly for a \$1.50 upcharge, and you should, but beware, on one of my visits they ran out.

The sins of the ramen are mostly forgiven by many of the other small appetizer plates. Fried garlic chicken is flaky, juicy to the bone, tossed with sesame seeds and bathed in a sweet soy sauce that recalls the excellent poultry served at Crisp in Lake View. Spicy pork ribs are coated in sriracha,



The duck breast buns at Oiistar feature soft dumpling pockets stuffed with rich, rare meat drizzled with jalapeno chutney tempered with golden raisins and grassy, crisp micro-greens. | TOM CRUZE-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

scallion and crispy shallots. These sweet and spicy sticks may be some of the better non-smoked ribs in the city. I wanted to double-check this observation, but my wife liked the ribs so much, she stole most of mine.

Good thing I had the duck breast buns to fall back on — soft dumpling pockets stuffed with rich, rare meat drizzled with a jalapeno chutney

whose fire was well-tempered with plump, juicy golden raisins and grassy, crisp micro-greens.

Speaking of greens, though the Oii salad featuring fanned sliced cucumbers looked like the cheesy work of an '80s-era nouveau cuisine-skewing chef, the crunchy cuke, the peppery arugula, the creamy parmesan and the pop of fresh dill was refreshing.

The wine-poached pear stuffed with Chantilly cream, which is pretty much straight out of the old Charlie Trotter cookbooks (save for some candied ginger) was undercooked and tough. And while creme brulee, topped with espresso "caviar" — tiny coffee-flavored bubbles — was a thoughtful twist on the classic, a noodle joint can't thrive on custard alone.



The fried garlic chicken is flaky, juicy to the bone, tossed with sesame seeds and bathed in a sweet soy sauce.



The Oii salad boasts crunchy cucumbers, arugula, creamy parmesan and fresh dill.



Oiistar Chef and owner Sunny Yim.

OIISTAR 1/2★

1385 N. Milwaukee; (773) 360-8791; www.oiistar.com

Hours: 5:30–10 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Sunday; 5:30–11 p.m. Thursday-Saturday.

Prices: Buns, \$8; ramen, \$13-\$15.50; appetizers, \$6-10; sides, \$2.95-5.95; dessert, \$5.

Try: Oii salad, spicy pork ribs and creme brulee

In a bite: So-so noodles and great Asian-inspired snacks in Wicker Park.

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

SIDE DISHES



The pho dac biet soup at Pho 888. | BRIAN JACKSON-SUN-TIMES

Though Oiistar's ramen comes up short, these three Asian noodle bowls do not disappoint:

ARAMI, 1829 W. Chicago; (773) 243-1535; aramichicago.com

Vibe: With lots of timber, brick and a huge wall of skylights, this West Town sushi spot feels like a West Loop loft.

Flavor: I believe the Arami Ramen — filled with super-funky pork belly, silky broth, tangy house-made pickles, braised tender beef, a soft-poached egg and earthy enoki mushroom shoots — is the best ramen in Chicago.

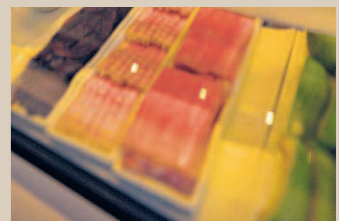


Carrot Soup at Macku Sushi. | DOM NAJOLIA-SUN-TIMES

PHO 888, 1137 W. Argyle; (773) 907-8838

Vibe: Blue formica tabletops, industrial vinyl and metal chairs and cold ceramic tile make this place feel one slight step above a genuine utilitarian soup hawk's stand in Vietnam.

Flavor: But don't let the vibe fool you. The beefy-tea like broth featuring an anise and ginger perfume of the Pho Dac Biet or house special beef noodle soup here is one of the most satisfying soup bowls in Chicago.



Spicy tuna rolls at Macku Sushi. | DOM NAJOLIA-SUN-TIMES

quettes, dark wood tables and a plethora of mirrors provide a sexy, contemporary setting.

Flavor: Macku's king crab-infused carrot soup, spiced with Chinese seven-spice powder, topped with whipped cream and a rice crisp that wafts coconut perfume, is so exquisite it wouldn't be out of place as a course on one of Chicago's best tasting menus.

MACKU SUSHI, 2239 N. Clybourn; (773) 880-8012; mackusushi.com

Vibe: Green leather ban-

— Michael Nagrant