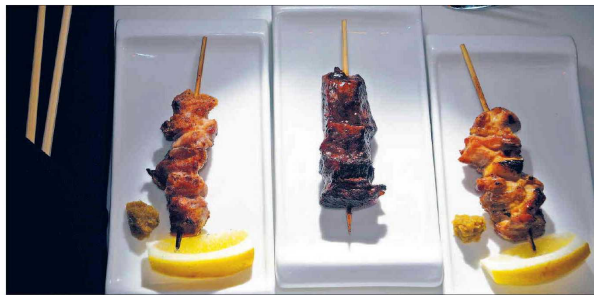




diningout

BY MICHAEL NAGRANT | email diningout@suntimes.com | follow @michaelnagrant



At Slurping Turtle, the stellar chicken thigh (from left), Kobe beef and pork belly skewers are succulent delights thanks in great measure to the bincho grilling they receive. (JOHN J. KIM - SUNTIMES PHOTOS)



"Tan Tan Men" soup boasts a chili-spiked stock filled with luscious golf ball-sized pork meatballs. (JOHN J. KIM - SUNTIMES PHOTOS)



The golden-brown, duck fat-fried chicken features succulent-to-the-bone flesh surrounded by a crispy crust, though it's served with a too-tiny helping of mayo-dressed cabbage.



For dessert, one of the best options at Slurping Turtle is the mint-infused, sweet condensed and coconut milk shooter with raw quail egg, which drinks like a thick egg nog.



The Slurping Turtle makes full use of its tiny Bincho grill to fire up its skewered beef and seafood delicacies.

A BEAUTIFUL NOISE

Slurping Turtle raising the bar on traditional Japanese fare

An izakaya is a Japanese businessmen's bar featuring sake, beer and comforting finger foods. Five years ago, you'd rarely find one outside of Japan. In the last two years in Chicago, it seems like hundreds have opened up, yet the current izakaya crop has been mostly made up of unimpressive storefronts serving subpar sushi and watery noodle bowls that barely rate better than Tepal Ramen. That is until the Slurping Turtle opened its doors in River North.

True izakayas are generally located in below grade basements behind iron bars in seedy districts in Tokyo — no-tell motels of karaoke and debauchery. In contrast, Slurping Turtle, like its owner Takashi Yagihashi, a chef with a thick presidential coil of salt and pepper who sometimes works the line in a Red Hot Chili Peppers T-shirt, is relatively edgy and cool. Really, the only thing neezy about Slurping Turtle is its excellent sesame-enriched chocolate macaron featuring a chewy cookie and an outer crust that shatters like shards of mica under the tooth.

Slurping Turtle is regaled with towering cedar block walls, white wicker banquettes and Eibansu-like flower arrangements — a fragrant, mostly-Russian ging aesthetic. It is built for a generation that gets its prurient kicks on the Internet. I'm positive nothing on the Web can inspire the carnal lust I have for Yagihashi's fried chicken, a golden duck fat-fried, crispy-crust-ed cube of succulent, to-the-bone flesh. It's a Harajuku/Popeye's sliver. And while it needs no adornment, the sad thicket of sparsely spicy mayo-dressed cabbage served on the side makes you yearn for a dipping sauce to cut the richness after a few bites.

Though the chicken is nonpareil, Takashi does not forsake the pig. These days pork belly is more ubiquitous than Kim Kardashian, and food writers decree it more than a study third world dictator. And yet, were any of those journalists to snuck a bite of the carbon-kissed, mahogany-skinned glistening pork belly perfumed with charcoal from Turtle's bincho grill, I guarantee they'd immediately retire to the nearest cafe to compose a paean.

Yagihashi's bincho fare is inspiring. While the generous haul of grilled egg-gro and cubes of rare American-style Kobe beef, a la a Washiyagu, served with a tiny pool of orange-perfumed ponzu dipping sauce are stellar, a single slice of juicy chicken thigh glazed in soy and spritzed with lemon tastes just as luscious. Vegetarians are likely despairing at reading the above, and frankly they should; for the grilled kabocha squash leaves the grill desiccated, dusty and dense, and the trumpet

royal mushrooms, while bathed in an excellent miso glaze, are Goodyear tire rubber. Asparagus is promising, however it's best wrapped in the optional bacon. If you're a tad more tolerant in your diet, allowing for sea creatures, but not gluten, the Slurping Noodle, a rich broth filled with veal-free rice noodles topped with pearly plump nabos of tender black shrimp and a shower of spicy cilantro is quite fulfilling. While the best broth is rejuvenating. The metagoo-like dumplings, filled with salty tuna eggs that pop in your mouth like a breached wa-

ter balloon, truly delight. I didn't know they were filled and thus bit in to one and discharged an orange stream of roe upon my lip and the arm of the guy next to me at the communal table where I was seated. (Sorry, dude!)

Most of the noodles are excellent. Shoyu ramen featuring a hard-boiled egg bobbing and floating like a tiny delight amidst clouds of tender chewy noodles and planks of silky braised pork in soy broth is a sensational slurp. Though it is not quite as good as the "tan tan men," a chili-spiked stock filled with golf ball-sized pork meatballs so rich and

luscious, Italian cook supreme Tony Maurano (Spagna) might want to watch his back. The thing about the soup bowls however, is that while they're good, they're not transcendent. Yagihashi's noodles aren't made in-house, and they while they're solid, they don't have that super-fresh spring. The braised pork in the shoyu is tender, but it's almost flavorless. Yagihashi's broths are deeply savory, but they don't have the voluptuous body of stocks I've had elsewhere. If a superior noodle bowl is like the Beatles, then Slurping Turtle's is like the fine

Beatsle imitators, Oasis. I have few quibbles with dessert, which is surprising, for Asian cuisine is not known for its incredible sweets. If you were to have Slurping Turtle's "An Mitau" sundae featuring vanilla ice cream, chilled red beans and agar agar cubes, you'd know why: it tastes like the remains of a three-way collision between a drunken fifties housewife's Jello mold, Wendy's chili and a keto-filled Dairy Queen blizzard. But, every other dessert — including an incredible caramelized coconut cream puff filled with oozing sweet custard, and a

shooter of braising mint-infused sweet condensed and coconut milk (that thanks to a raw quail egg drinks like a thick egg nog) — is righteous. It's not the kind of shot you'd probably find at a traditional izakaya, but that's expected, for Slurping Turtle's strength is found in invention, not tradition. Michael Nagrant is a local freelance writer. Follow @michaelnagrant. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.

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