



# diningout

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# FOR THE BIRDS

## Pecking Order falls short of star chef's promise

A chef makes a big name working at a prominent restaurant in a fancy Gold Coast hotel. She steps down, imperils all that she's worked for to pursue her dream of opening a humble fried chicken shack influenced by her Filipino roots in a city that, while a great food town, is sorely lacking in great fried chicken. It's the kind of gutsy move I love, the kind of thing I'd buy a box of popcorn for to munch while watching it all go down. What could go wrong? At, Pecking Order, a new Ravenswood gourmet chicken emporium from that very chef, Kristine Subido of W Hotel's Wave restaurant, it turns out, a lot.

The problem with being so high profile is that people expect a lot. Were this some night-class-culinary school grad who chucked fame and fortune at a consulting firm to open quietly on a corner, to grow and see what happens, I might not expect so much. But of Subido, who commandeered a brigade, fed thousands and who should know her way around a hail of kosher salt, I want more.

It is one thing for an occasional side dish or a dessert to be off, but



Pecking Order restaurant's grilled sweet corn (left) and garlic fried rice.



when the centerpiece — in this case the chicken — isn't quite clucking on all cylinders, that's a problem. The menu says the roasted chicken is stuffed with lemongrass and ginger, slow-cooked in a rotisserie and based with annatto-Calamansi butter. It may have been massaged and fed a steady diet of top-shelf whiskey too, but it did not taste of any of these things. Its skin, though nicely blackened, was wet and wrinkled. I would expect it to burst with citrus from the Calamansi (also known as a golden lime) and to waft the spicy bite of ginger, but none of the menu's promises were kept. It was succulent in places, dry in others. And it was woefully lacking in salt.

The grilled chicken had a nice

carbon-streaked crust. It is supposedly basted in a marinade reduction passed down by Subido's ancestors, but again, while it was juicy, the juices were also devoid of that desired bit of salinity.

The fried chicken, or some of it anyway, was fairly perfect. Its taught, crackling skin glistened like the German fried chicken I grew up eating in Frankenmuth, Michigan's famous Zehnder's restaurant. The legs were moist to the bone, but the breast pieces were splinter-dry at the core. It too was not blessed by the generosity of a saltshaker. But the execution on the almost perfect legs lets you know there is promise.

Much is made of how the hormone- and antibiotic-free chickens at Pecking Order "don't do drugs." This resulted in a more tender flesh, but not a more flavorful one.



The fried chicken is a hit-and-miss affair, as tender, juicy legs are served alongside dry breast pieces. | TOM CRUZE-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

The counter staff at Pecking Order left a lot to be desired, too. Though the restaurant was mostly empty, they banished my party to the front of the restaurant because we were not drinking. I recognize of course that there are only a few tables near the bar and there might be a mad dash of thirsty adult beverage-seeking diners rushing through the door, and it would be rude of us to get in the way.

However, this never happened on my visits. The front of the restaurant, painted a pleasant cafe au lait tone, is a fine exile. In fact it's much cheerier than the windowless bunker of the bar room, but human nature dictates that you relish the thing you can't have.

I did find contentment, though, in grilled sweet corn, blistered and showered with a hail of cilantro, lime mayo and cotija cheese. A bite



Kristine Subido

## PECKING ORDER

1/2★

4416 N. Clark,  
(773) 907-9900;  
peckingorderchicago.com

**Hours:** 4 p.m.–10 p.m. Tuesday–Friday; 11 a.m.–10 p.m., Saturday; 11 a.m.–5 p.m. Sunday

**Prices:** Chicken \$7.95–\$17.95; specialties \$4.50–\$12; Sides \$2–\$4.25

**Try:** Fried chicken, pinoy eggs, and garlic fried rice

**In a bite:** A high end chef steps down from her high-profile hotel gig to cook gourmet Filipino-inspired chicken and gets a little lost along the way.

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



The Pecking Order's Pinoy Eggs encased in house-made longaniza (Filipino sausage) are delicious.

recalled a languorous Humboldt Park afternoon chowing on a similar dish from the ubiquitous elotes vendors.

"Mom's pickles" — tangy shavings of jicama, curlicues of papaya, matchsticks of carrot and daikon — were good enough to be bottled and sold by Vlastic. What was bottled are three quite magnificently subtle house sauces — a sweet, vinegary, slightly iodine bitter relish-like banana ketchup, a salty green umami-blasted P.O. sauce, and spicy garlic chili vinegar.

The sauces mitigated the lack of saltiness on the chicken rather well, and so I forgave some of the other mistakes over satisfying panko-crust-ed, deep-fried pinoy eggs wrapped in house-made longaniza (Filipino sausage) swooshed with spicy mayo-like sauce. My tablemates fought over these.

I would also happily line my future bar bender-sloshed stomach with Subido's pillowy white rice whose haunting whisper of toasted garlic mesmerizes. But I'd have to be seven sheets to the wind to want to really dig into the plate of soggy, fried, smashed red potatoes smothered in Gouda. At least I know where all the salt has gone, for it was most

definitely in every square inch of the brackish "Lolas" gravy soaking the bottoms of the potatoes.

Carb-bombs like the eggs and the potatoes are in great abundance at Pecking Order, including hefty arancini balls riddled with a parsimony of coconut chicken adobo. Like the Calamansi, the coconut flavor was missing in action. The whole ball itself was mushy and flavorless.

Subido is as sweet as the preserved syrup-laden fruit on her halo halo dessert, a sno-cone-meets-fruit cup-like affair. She is a mother hen working the room, warmly greeting and generously thanking all comers. I appreciate her earnestness. I want this story to end well for her. There's enough here to suggest it very well may, but she needs to leave the dining room behind, and get back in the kitchen and whip up a better next chapter.

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



A trio of house sauces — garlic chili vinegar (from left), banana ketchup and P.O. Sauce are quite flavorful.