

A man with a beard and a tattoo on his left arm, wearing a white chef's coat, holds a small red chili pepper in his right hand. He is standing against a dark red background. The text is overlaid on the lower half of the image.

The New Melting Pot

The latest generation of Chicago chefs is blurring the lines between traditional and contemporary, ethnic and American. The results?

Clearly delicious.

BY AMBER GIBSON



(FACING PAGE) CHEF
JOHN MANION OF LA
SIRENA CLANDESTINA
GIVES CHICAGO A
KICKY BRAZILIAN
FLAVOR; HIS FEIJODA
BEEF STEW IS
PICTURED HERE.



After hosting the James Beard Foundation Awards for the first time in 2015, Chicago solidified its standing as a culinary force to be reckoned with. What was, for a long time, a meat and potatoes town gave rise to avant-garde molecular gastronomy about a decade ago with restaurants like Alinea, Moto and Graham Elliot Bistro.

Now the pendulum is swinging in a new direction. These days, what Chicago does best is flavorful comfort food that is meant for sharing. Chefs like Rick Bayless and Bill Kim led the way by bringing (respectively) Mexican and Korean cuisine to the masses and inspiring a new wave of chefs who weave their personal, multicultural stories into their food.

“It’s never straight-up Korean. I’m not straight-up Korean,” says Parachute Restaurant’s Chef Beverly Kim. “Food is a language, and I speak English, and I’m American, but I also know Korean food, and those flavors are part of my language, too.”

This blended language of food and culture is a trending theme among

Chicago chefs and restaurants, and it has Chicago diners and critics eager to learn more.

Last year, Parachute won Best New Restaurant accolades from the Chicago Tribune and the Jean Banchet Awards for Culinary Excellence, and was also recognized as a 2015 James Beard Foundation Award finalist in the same category. The homey, little corner restaurant is now a must-try on any food-lover’s list, despite its location on a barren stretch of Elston Avenue in the beyond-downtown neighborhood of Avondale.

Sure, there’s an obvious Korean influence at Parachute—Kim is second-gen Korean, and her partner-husband Johnny Clark has experience cooking in Korea—but there’s no pigeon-holing here. While there’s classic housemade kimchi, Korean flavors and techniques serve as a mere foundation for imaginative recipes that wow.

“The dishes stem from the Korean philosophy of having plenty of texture, acid, umami, funk, fermentation, freshness and lightness, but being playful with the ingredients,” Kim explains.

(PREVIOUS PAGES, FROM LEFT) COURTESY
LA SIRENA CLANDESTINA, @NICOLE ESS

Fried tapioca with pecorino is like Korean arancini; creamy boudin noir is paired with seasonal fruit, crunchy puffed grains and seeds; and the restaurant's bing potato bread is a hands-down favorite. It tastes like an inflated Chinese scallion pancake stuffed with an American loaded baked potato, complete with bacon bits, potato chunks and chopped scallions—with a generous dollop of sour cream butter on the side.

Across town in the West Loop, Chef John Manion's Brazilian-inspired La Sirena Clandestina transports taste buds to a South American beach town with his housemade hot sauce and caipirinhas (Brazil's national cocktail). But Manion is the first to say that he's not serving an authentic Brazilian meal.

"I'm in no way doing ethnic food, but the food we cook at La Sirena is certainly filtered through the prism of my experience," he explains. "It was the need to recapture some of the food memories that I had from growing up [in Brazil] that made me cook this way."

Traditional rice and beans and feijoada beef stew are interspersed with rich pork loin milanese, smoked ribs with spicy piri piri jelly and crisp whole fried fish dressed with peanuts, cilantro and housemade hot sauces.

"I've never actually seen a fish fried in farofa [toasted cassava flour] with an herb and chili salad served on top, with three hot sauces, served out of a beach shack in Brazil, but I feel like if I did, it wouldn't be totally out of place," he says. "That flavor and soul will always be on the menu, but we live in Chicago and respect the seasons and geography."

Similarly, you'll see Midwestern ingredients like asparagus, berries and stone fruit on the menu at Fat Rice, which serves the widest repertoire of home-style Macanese dishes in the world.

Chef Abe Conlon first learned of Macau and its Portuguese-Asian cuisine in a *Saveur* magazine article in 1999. As a Portuguese-American who grew up in Lowell, Mass., among a large Southeast Asian population, Conlon found Macau's history intriguing.

"I'd never been to Macau before, but the culture felt familiar," he says.



TO FAT RICE, ADRIENNE LO AND ABE CONLON BRING THE INTRIGUING FLAVORS OF MACAU, WHICH REFLECTS MULTIPLE INFLUENCES ITSELF: DISHES CHANNEL INGREDIENTS FROM PORTUGAL, BRAZIL, AFRICA, INDIA, SOUTHERN CHINA AND JAPAN, LIKE THE POTSTICKERS (ABOVE).



IN A MARINADE OF
PAPRIKA, GARLIC AND
MARJORAM, CHEF PAPA-
DOPOLOUS'S CHICKEN
PAPRIKASH IS A FAVORITE
AT BOHEMIAN HOUSE.

That may be due to the mixture of influences on this special administrative region of China. Portuguese explorers picked up techniques and ingredients from Brazil, Africa, India, Southern China and Japan before reaching Macau. Each of these cultures is expressed in the vibrant flavors at Fat Rice.

Conlon and partner Adrienne Lo visited Macau for just 36 hours prior to opening Fat Rice in 2012, then returned to Asia a couple of years later, retracing the roots of Macanese cuisine and spending weeks interviewing and cooking with locals in their homes and restaurants.

Their immersion led to some changes at home, like swapping a popular fat noodle dish that was more Cantonese than Macanese for lacassa, a skinnier stir-fried rice noodle with char siu pork, shrimp, egg, bean sprouts and sweet pickled red ginger achar.

They also discovered that Macanese food is very much an oral tradition, and many dishes aren't available anywhere beyond people's own kitchens. Conlon counts just three restaurants in all of Macau serving the type of food he has on the menu at Fat Rice. It's that home cooking that most inspires his menu.

One thing they have made their own, though, is the spice level. Conlon was surprised to find quite nuanced flavors in Macau.

"Macanese flavor profiles are subtle and mellow," he explains. "If there's cumin or soy in the dish, you can hardly taste it. If there's curry in a dish, it's minimal. Their balichão shrimp paste is very mild. ...Chicagoans want bigger, bolder flavors, so we go halfway."

For example, in a diablo meat stew, he'll use mustard seeds for a more impactful sauce, like they do in Malaysia. Although leafy greens and other vegetables do not play a large role in Macanese cuisine, Conlon relies on his chef training and outsider's perspective to make a few tweaks, while still preserving the integrity of a dish and its history.

"We garnish with fresh, contrasting vegetables, local herbs, shaved asparagus and radishes to add complexity to the dish," he says.

As opposed to Conlon's immediate fascination with Macau, Bohemian House's Greek chef Jimmy Papadopoulos wasn't initially smitten with the idea of cooking Eastern European food.

"Honestly, I thought it was just dumplings, schnitzels and potato pancakes," Papadopoulos admits. But he couldn't say no when two first-time



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— JIMMY PAPADOPOULOS

restaurateurs of Czech heritage offered him the opportunity to go from cooking at a suburban hotel steakhouse to running the kitchen at a new restaurant in River North, one of Chicago's most visitor-friendly neighborhoods.

So first, he did some research. In other words, he tasted his way through traditional Eastern European restaurants on the outskirts of Chicago (where most of them are now), searching for inspiration and an understanding of how European immigrants preserve their culture through food.

"There was pork loin with gravy, roast duck, dumplings, sausages and beer, and the whole meal would be very heavy," he recalls. "You wouldn't see a single green vegetable. It was all good, soulful cooking, but I wanted to do something more."

For Bohemian House, Papadopoulos serves staples like pierogi and pork schnitzel with finesse and colorful, thoughtfully mismatched plating that mirrors the restaurant's whimsical gypsy vibe. It also helped that the owners gave him complete autonomy.

"I could pull inspiration from Eastern Europe as a whole, rather than being specifically Czech or Polish," he says.

This loose bohemian definition of Eastern Europe allows for winning interpretations like

the grilled chicken paprikash, adapted from hearty Hungarian chopped chicken stew. In Papadopoulos's version, a half-chicken is marinated in paprika, garlic, marjoram and lemon, then charred on the grill. The accompanying chicken stock and sour cream sauce embodies the soul of paprikash, but reimagined—instead of cooking the peppers in the sauce, Papadopoulos pickles them to use as a bright, acidic garnish.

"When you see our dish, you are definitely not thinking of a paprikash," he says. "But when you taste it, it hints towards the heritage and history of the traditional dish."

And it's exactly that heritage and history that has created some of Chicago's top food innovators and the willing taste-testers who seek them out. Diners who eschew the predictable in favor of the unexpected. Who find unfamiliar spices and unpronounceable ingredients intriguing rather than off-putting. Who relish menus that require Googling foreign words. As Chicago's culinary language continues to use culture as its filter, chefs create a perfect blend, maintaining the city's reputation as a melting pot—now, with a welcome and flavorful twist.