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Food

Bad Saint review: A Filipino restaurant packs big tastes into a small package

By **Tom Sietsema** January 6 at 11:00 AM   Follow @tomsietsema

★★★ EXCELLENT



The modern equivalent of a dinner bell? At Bad Saint in Columbia Heights, showtime is when the bamboo window shades of the trim restaurant roll up, and strings of outside lights, stretching from facade to trees, switch from dark to bright. With luck, you are among the first two dozen or so people in line at 5:30 p.m. The 24-seat Filipino eatery, which accepts parties no larger than four, adds to the city yet another dining

attraction that doesn't take reservations (indeed, it doesn't even have a phone).

Nick Pimentel and Genevieve Villamora are the co-owners of Bad Saint in Columbia Heights. (Dayna Smith/For the Washington Post)

The chicharrones are dusted with Cheetos-orange XO powder and presented with a bowl of chili vinegar. (Dayna Smith/For the Washington Post)

A host, likely coowner Genevieve Villamora, admits a few early birds at a time, asking about allergies before showing guests to a perch in the restaurant equivalent of a micro apartment. A handful of fortunate customers quickly fills two tight booths along the left wall and three seats, one for solo acts, fronting the open kitchen. Remaining early birds land at a slender ledge in the rear or (better) a counter with a window facing 11th Street NW. The former comes with a band of mirrors for decoration, meaning your view is of yourself drinking a Manila Sling and eating lumpia. The latter setup frames a sidewalk lined with people who want to trade places with you.

Getting into Bad Saint takes effort. Eating there leaves you grateful. The latest instance of Filipino food in the region, Bad Saint celebrates a cuisine influenced by colonialism and trade partners — Spain, Mexico, China, the United States — while combining the talent of three principals who have family ties to the Philippines. (Coowner Nick Pimentel, a partner in nearby Room 11, and chef Tom Cunanan, a veteran of the local Knightsbridge Restaurant Group, round out the cast.) The names of many of the dishes, served family style and in no particular order, may be unfamiliar to nonnatives, but their personalities encourage you to learn them, if only so you can call them by name the next visit.



Bad Saint's kitchen staff, including chef Tom Cunanan in the yellow hat and line cook Duane Shand in the gray, perform a balancing act in the small space. (Dayna Smith/For the Washington Post)

Warm up with ukoy. It's what happens when you introduce shredded sweet potato, carrots, yuca and whole freshwater shrimp to a cornstarch slurry and fry the mass in hot oil until everything sticks. "Eat it with your hands," a server instructs. A tad sweet and pleasantly funky, the spiky fritter comes with a chili vinegar that excites the eating and a crunch loud enough to perk up neighbors' ears.

Another dish that's easy to fall for is tapa, what tastes like beef jerky (only sweeter) on a nest of greens with a split cooked farm egg in the center. "It's a breakfast dish," says the server, who coaches us to mix the runny garnish with the greens, the airdried meat and rice that lines the bottom of the bowl.

More daring: bitter melon, "named appropriately," says Villamora of the chopped green squash that keeps company with fermented Chinese black beans, pungent long peppers and fluffy scrambled egg in a dish that ended my year on a high and a sigh.

Inquiries about the food sometimes elicit backstories. Ask for a bowl called (altogether now!) sinigang na hip on at isda, and you might be told that the meaty snakefish in the tamarindspiked fish broth, so

bodacious it should be bottled and sold separately, is caught by local watermen using flashlights and crossbows at night. There are shrimp in the swirl, too, and they're tasty swimmers. Several adobos populate the menu, but only one of the dishes (which feature a protein marinated in cane vinegar, bay leaf and garlic, among other amplifiers) is described to us by a server as "lifechanging." Hyperbole? Suffice it to say the tingling braised chicken — rich with coconut milk, dusky with turmeric and scattered with fresh coconut charred on the grill — moves me enough to scrape clean the clay pot. The vessel also finds room for soft chunks of Jarrahdale pumpkin, the prized gourd native to Australia.



A braised chicken dish is served with pumpkin, coconut milk, turmeric and charred coconut. (Dayna Smith/For the Washington Post)

Whole fried branzino buried under spicy greens is an enticing tower of hot and cool, crisp skin and snowy flesh, but hard to tackle given the entree's height and the lack of a second plate for removing the bones. Did I mention dining space is at a premium? "You have to be skinny to work here," a pal says as the two of us dodge an incoming order the night we're wedged into a ledge.

The best word to describe much of this cooking: bold. My preferred chicharrones these days are the fried pork (sometimes chicken) skins dusted with Cheetos orange XO powder and presented as a bouquet alongside a bowl of chili vinegar. Even the salads lean in. Chopped purple cabbage tossed with toasted almonds and bites of pomelo, similar to grapefruit, gets downright saucy in tandem with a habanero vinaigrette.

If the easy and gracious service feels familiar, it's because Villamora comes to the project from Little Serow and Komi, the four star Thai and Greek restaurants, respectively, revered as much for their attention in the dining room as for what leaves the kitchen.

The upside to taking more than two years to open: The owners had time to think through a lot of details — Filipino inspired cocktails, among other fine points — before turning on the lights in September.

While the interior is cramped, the design does its best to distract diners with a view — say, a kitchen animated by dancing fire and a large wok, or the personal effects of the staff, including a shrine created from family photos and a shelf set off with mahjongg tiles. What looks to be wooden lattice over your head is oxidized, laser cut steel, its pattern modeled after that of the woven baskets specific to

Mindanao, the island in the Philippines where Pimentel's father was born.



Tapa, a dish of dried beef, greens and an egg, evokes a breakfast of beef jerky — in a good way. (Dayna Smith/For the Washington Post)

Bad Saint offers just one dessert, no doubt to discourage diners from lingering, because there's always someone somewhere hoping to get a call from the restaurant telling them a few inches of personal space have been freed up. The lone finish, like so much of what comes before it, renders a reason to return: heirloom purple rice from the Philippines strewn with soft bites of cooked apple and airy puffed rice, enlivened with lime zest, its tropical aroma heightened by the steam.

Images of a long-ago Louisiana fishing village, Saint Malo, home to one of the earliest immigrant populations from the Philippines, make plain the restaurant's name: Malo means "bad" in Spanish.

Diners might translate the experience a little differently: small space, big adventure. 3 stars

Location: 3226 11th St. NW. No phone. badsaintdc.com.

Open: 5:30 to 10 p.m. Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Thursday. 5:30 to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Closed Tuesday.

Prices :Appetizers \$6 to \$14, main dishes \$12 to \$28.

(Sound check: 82 decibels / Extremely loud.)

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