

# eat & drink

LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE PHOTOS



Peruvian margarita



Mouthful of Diamonds



Pisco Olivo

THE TAKITO KITCHEN CREW STRETCHES ITS LEGS AT WEST LOOP'S BAR TAKITO

# BIGGER IS BET

By **Kate Bernot** | FOR REDEYE

Second projects are tricky business, especially if your debut work was a success. (Just ask The Strokes.) Wicker Park's Takito Kitchen has hit a comfortable stride on Division Street since opening in spring 2013, but the team behind the casual Mexican spot had ambitions for another restaurant. The narrow storefront that houses the first Takito didn't have room for a bar, so beverage director Adam Weber's mostly tequila-focused cocktail list didn't seem to get the shine it deserves. When Takito's owners walked through the former Kabocha space in the shadows of the gleaming new Morgan "L" stop, they saw the larger location as an opportunity to delve into South American food and drinks. With nearly double the space, they thought, both the bar and kitchen could stretch their legs. I stopped in on opening weekend to find Bar Takito already rocking.

## What's in a name?

Cocktail menus can take time to read through, especially when they're full of spir-its such as cachaca, rum agricole and pisco, which Weber admits not many Americans are familiar with. His solution? Give the drinks names that will catch guests' eyes. "Names are something that jumps off the page and makes people ask about a drink,"

Weber said. A cocktail called That Is What They Called Me In High School (\$12) drew me in with its goofy name—and the well-balanced combination of rum agricole, sweet sherry and tart, vinegar-based raspberry shrub. Still unsure about a new-to-you South American spirit? Just ask for a tiny sip. "If you can't describe [a liquor] in words, the best way to do it is just give them a taste," Weber said. If you're on a date and

are too engrossed in conversation to ask questions, you can't go wrong with any of the three margaritas on the list. For a bit of heat, try the Peruvian margarita (\$11), which has an aji amarillo pepper-flecked rim. More ambitious drinkers will appreciate the Pisco Olivo (\$11), a pisco-based cocktail that's made with muddled grapefruit, honey syrup, ginger liqueur, velvet falernum (a tiki drink staple) and finished with a barely perceptible spray of olive oil that Weber said gives it a creamier texture. As the weather transitions from summer to fall, I'll be back for another Oaxacan Chalice (\$12), a negroni riff that subs slightly smoky mezcal for gin and Cappelletti aperitif for Campari, yielding a lower-proof, more floral version of the classic. Beers are mostly bottled, with both import and local craft options available.

## Come (a little bit) hungry

While Takito Kitchen is mostly Mexican- and taco-focused, chef David Dworshak draws from multiple Latin American cuisines at Bar Takito—and keeps one eye on

the bar. "[David] wanted to take inspiration from the bar and bring it to the kitchen," Weber said. "He makes a beer-infused tortilla. He brings bitters into the food and cooks with wine and mezcal, too." None of this is heavy-handed, though; I didn't even realize there was tequila in the perfectly acidic sea bass ceviche (\$12) I had devoured atop sturdy slivers of fried yucca. A week later, I'm still daydreaming about the vegetarian beer cheese arepa (\$10), a slightly sweet Colombian-style corn cake perfectly complimented by wild mushrooms, pickled vegetables and chili-peanut sauce. My date said it was one of the best dishes he's eaten in months, which

may explain how quickly we cleaned that plate. While corn is still in season, don't overlook the esquites (\$8), an off-the-cob take on elotes flavored here with queso fresco, chili aioli, cilantro and a genius brown butter that adds a savory richness most corn salads lack. Someone with a big appetite might want to opt for a few more shared plates, but with larger dishes priced between \$10 and \$26, don't expect to get off cheaply.







Paloma



That is What They Called Me In High School

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## Choose your own seating adventure

This area of the West Loop catches a few different types of people: the post-work crowd from downtown heading west, groups grabbing a drink before a dinner on Randolph Street or couples looking to extend a date to one more cocktail spot. I saw all types of guests during my visit to Bar Takito, from a solo drinker at the bar to a 12-person group at a bar-adjacent table to double dates at more traditional dining room seating. The chameleon-like room is a far cry from the austere gray and brown interior of Kabocha, the Asian restaurant that occupied this space for less than a year before closing in February. Graffiti-esque murals and exposed light bulbs with heavy, tangled blue cords could look cheesy in another space, but the expansive, energetic room wears them well. Bottom line: The fun, cohesive food and cocktails prove that Takito's team can take what they've done well at their first restaurant and build on it; which is good news if they follow through on what Weber said is a goal of "five or six" restaurant and bar projects. Bar Takito proves sophomore slump was never even in the group's vocabulary.

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