



Cool(er) fusion

The Shikami brothers set the French influence aside at Loop's serene **Shikago**

Shikago

★★★

190 S. LaSalle St.

312-781-7300

Open: Dinner Mon.-Sat.,
lunch Mon.-Fri.

Entree prices: \$24-\$32

Credit cards: A, DC, DS,
M, V

Reservations: Accepted

Noise: Conversation-
friendly

Other: Wheelchair
accessible; no smoking

RATINGS KEY:

- ★★★★★ EXCELLENT
- ★★★★ VERY GOOD
- ★★★ GOOD
- ★★ SATISFACTORY
- ★ LOUSY

If you can overlook its split-personality interior, Shikago, a 3-month-old restaurant in the Loop, will feed you quite well. Indeed, the food is terrific. The look ... takes some getting used to. Sitting in the heart of the city's financial district, Shikago aims to serve the Loop's sit-down dining crowd as well as the frantic lunch-at-your-desk types. Accordingly, the front half of the restaurant's space is given over to carryout, with refrigerated display cases of ready-to-eat dishes, a reach-in cooler of packaged nibbles and a sushi-to-order station.

A few steps beyond sits the low-lit dining room, where thick wood-slab tabletops perch on delicate-looking pedestals, and minimalist photographs mingle with a complex art installation of undulating metal strips and supporting cables.

It's a sedate oasis from the downtown madness – or would be, if not for those annoying video screens mounted on the carryout-section walls, distractingly close to the dining area. During one dinner, the displays alternated between pictures of fashion models in languid repose and a light-saber duel from a “Star Wars” film. I'm sorry, what were you saying?

Please discard the TVs, guys. They disturb the room's serenity, and detract from the kitchen's serious food.

The owners are brothers Alan and Kevin Shikami, who also own Kevin restaurant in River North. Kevin the chef was one of Chicago's first practitioners of Asian-influenced French cuisine (going back to his days at the late, great Jimmy's Place), and if you visit Kevin the restaurant, you'll likely agree that he remains one of the best. At Shikago, however, Kevin Shikami has executed a nifty about-face, producing cuisine that is emphatically Asian, with bare whispers of French tradition.

Thus duck breast, which might get an orange and star-anise sauce at Kevin, at Shikago appears atop a mountain of ramen noodles, shiitake mushrooms and minute pieces of duck confit, surrounded by a spicy miso broth. Mahi mahi, encased in a crunchy rice-cracker crust, sits over a tomato, mango and ginger coulis. Pork tenderloin, an insanely good dish, arrives in a fragrant, five-spice glaze over nutty, buttery black rice; off to the side, a strip of braised pork belly rests on a bed of bok choy, alongside a spring roll

the
diner's
club



Three of Shikago's more popular dishes (from left): stir fried broccoli, spicy sesame chicken, and carp tails.

stuffed with napa cabbage, plum and smoked pork jowl.

The menu highlights several maki rolls, among them the signature Shikago maki, a pleasant mix of King salmon, avocado, tomato, cilantro and spicy mayo; and the better-still maki of tempura salmon and King crab; a red-curry vinaigrette gives the rice a pinkish hue, and a rich lobster reduction surrounds the pieces. Do ask for the bar menu, which lists other maki rolls and nigiri pieces.

Shikami is at his fusion-cooking best with his Vietnamese spring rolls, stuffed with papaya, cucumber, chile and thin strips of bulgogi-style short-rib meat; they're served with a small salad of noodles, shaved cucumber and pickled vegetables (though my salad was drastically oversalted). I love the Thai beef salad, which

has excellent, tender beef and a spice level that demands attention but doesn't scorch your tonsils. And tuna tartare, a Shikami signature for nearly 20 years, is still impressive, a wide disc of well-seasoned, finely diced tuna, accompanied by pieces of spicy tuna sushi and a tiny pile of pickled vegetables (not oversalted, thank you).

I have a minor quibble with the sesame flatbread, which arrives unbidden in large, jagged and crispy pieces, drizzled with a reduced soy-mirin glaze. The glaze perks up the flatbread nicely, but it's very sticky; throughout the room you can see customers, first-timers especially, making vigorous use of their napkins.

Desserts are by Catherine Miller (ex-May Street Market), and she manages some brilliant turns, such as a stack of green-tea shortbread topped with piped chocolate cremeux, caramelized bananas, and a thin crown of vanilla creme brulee, served with a scoop of

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HOME COOKIN'

Squash and lentil ravioli

Prep: 1 hour Chill: 30 minutes Cook: 45 minutes Makes: 60 dumplings

1 small butternut squash, split lengthwise, seeds removed
¼ cup dried green lentils, rinsed
7 small amaretti cookies, coarsely crushed
½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon pepper
⅓ teaspoon each: ground cinnamon, grated nutmeg
60 round wonton or potsticker wrappers
Flour for dusting
½ stick (¼ cup) butter
1 sprig fresh rosemary
1 clove garlic, minced

Heat oven to 375 degrees. Place squash, flesh side down, on an oiled baking sheet. Roast until soft, 30-40 minutes. Fill a small saucepan halfway with water; heat to a boil. Add the lentils; cover. Simmer until tender, 40-50 minutes. Drain; mash lightly. Set aside. Remove the squash from the oven; cool.

Scoop the flesh out of the squash; mash in a medium bowl until almost smooth. Place the squash on a clean kitchen towel; bring together the ends of the towel. Twist to squeeze out as much liquid as you can. Return squash to bowl.





chocolate five-spice ice cream. There's also the imaginative slow baked apples, in which microthin apple slices are piled on a brown-butter sage cake and topped with a caramel sauce laced with bacon. With a scoop of maple ice cream, this creation is essentially a deconstructed pancake breakfast. And a tasty one.

The name Shikago, if you haven't already deduced it, is a contraction of Shikami and Chicago. It's pronounced exactly the same as our toddlin' town, virtually assuring frustration among potential customers flipping through phone books, typing in Internet searches and talking to directory assistance. A misdirectional bonus comes in the Adams Street entrance, which belies the LaSalle Street address.

The food, however, is worth the trouble.

Reviews are based on no fewer than two visits. The reviewer makes every effort to remain anonymous. Meals are paid for by this publication.