

## MOMOFUKU SSÄM BAR

207, Second Ave. (13<sup>th</sup> St.), E. Village

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O.K., so Asian-inflected BBQ pork buns are now everywhere, but the claim of turning it into an NYC fixture belongs firmly to one name, David Chang, and dropping by for lunch at his freewheeling ssäm joint in East Village for a quick pork bun fix will never go out of fashion. (Ssäm is a form of Asian burrito.)

In fact, that was exactly what K and I did, one Thursday noon, with only under an hour to spare before leaving for the train station. It was all very unfussy and informal, you sit down at one of the tables-for-two, scan the effortlessly eclectic but blessedly short menu, pick out your dishes and pace them out lest you may want more. K and I had once dined at David Chang's new swanky joint in Sydney, where everything in the multicourse foodie experience was Eden reincarnate, so he seemed a little too primed for the same level of perfection.

I, on the other hand, still blissed out by the long aftertaste of the sensational pork sliders at Danji, couldn't help but worry whether the version that started it all would, well, hold up to its own legend.

Thankfully, it did—only differently. Put succinctly: there was less sauce and more meat. And not just meat, but probably one of the best cuts of pork belly to ever grace a bun. It was fat, fabulous, melt in your mouth—a thing of singular beauty. It needed almost no enhancement (and certainly none of the demands of spice-oversaturated Asian palates). The hoisin sauce, as were the slivered cucumbers, was an accent, not the main event. If you want more spice, a bottle of sriracha is at your disposal.

The same principle applied to the rotisserie duck over rice, garnished ever so lightly by the house sauce, scallions and crispy shallots. Again, you were supposed to taste the duck, courtesy of Crescent farms in Long Island, not the accouterments. The only dish we tasted that I thought was a little too heavy on the eggs and not complex enough for what it promised was the kimchi deviled eggs, with chives and wasabi tobiko. Not enough kimchi there to bedevil us, I'm sad to report.

And therein, I guess, lies David Chang's genius: he offers us a miscellany of flavors in such a maverick, almost decontextualized way (hoisin sauce and cucumber for pork isn't particularly Korean in its provenance—Danji's version is more ethnically faithful—in the same way that XO sauce or chilli black bean sauce found in some of the vegetable sides and the romanesco used to jazz up fried duck dumplings aren't. Lamb in flatbread served with cucumber kimchi and sesame also isn't a Korean combination you often hear of but is really delicious. And how about those country ham offerings, so snugly they fit into them buns.), and yet, at the end of the day, it doesn't matter. Every pork slider, Korean or non-Korean, good or not so good, worships at the Momofuku shrine.

It is David Chang's very austerity, that rare instinctive restraint he applies to every unorthodox idea, that makes him a stayer and, to some, a demigod. And you still come out of the bar no poorer than when you did coming in.