

Szechuan in Chi-town

Chicago is not just a T-bone town. Visitors often come looking for bulky beef dishes, but Chef Vincent Lai at McCormick Place is hoping visitors rethink the culinary range of Chicago and is challenging palates with this Asian-influenced squab (pigeon) and root vegetable dish.

The dish is anchored with a breast of farmed pigeon and seasoned with a spicy Szechuan sauce of Hoisin, chili and garlic that both highlights and masks the gamey taste of the miniature fowl.

"It's a similar flavor to a duck breast, but a little more refined," he said, noting that the fowl is served atop a fennel and Moroccan-lemon slaw that accentuates the Asian spice.

Most of the dish is locally sourced. McCormick Place is developing a procurement program with Natural Direct, a Chicago area distribution network for organic dairy and meats. The vegetable sides in the dish hail from Midwest farms — the fingerling potatoes are poached in olive oil and served with sautéed mushrooms from River Valley Ranch in Burlington, Wis., while the blanched beets come from Miedema Farm in Jenison, Mich.

"The game jus sauce for the squab comes from a sun-dried longan," a tropical tree fruit native to Southeast Asia. "It's a great preserve to use in the winter time. We prefer to let the season decide what we're going to serve."

The dish comes with a second serving of squab, wrapped in organic squash and marinated with fresh herbs and garlic. It's slow-cooked, confit style — marinated in its own natural fat — until it's so tender the meat easily falls off the bone. Lai serves the dish on olive-oil-poached argula. The entire plate is garnished with micro greens.

Contact: (312) 791-7250



CHEF VINCENT LAI MCCORMICK PLACE SAVOR...CHICAGO

Chef Lai has settled in the Windy City after a nine-year stint at the San Jose (Calif.) Convention Center, and before that, the Vancouver Convention Center in British Columbia. He has served the world-class kitchens of the Renaissance and Mandarin Oriental Hotels in Hong Kong. Lai is a graduate of the British Columbia Institute of Technology culinary school.

"I challenge all of my clients to try something new," he said. "Chicago is such a food town and we are trying to feature our convention center as a destination where large, unique dishes are achievable."

MENU PRICE\$40 per plate
PAIRS WITH.....California Zinfandel

