

# Chicago Tribune

## Review: Stellar beer and food pairings could make Moody Tongue only the second Michelin-starred American brewpub



By PHIL VETTEL and JOSH NOEL

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Moody Tongue

The exterior of Moody Tongue, 2515 S. Wabash Ave. (John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune)

*Editor's note: This tandem review by Phil Vettel and Josh Noel begins with an intro by Vettel.*

The only brewpub in America with Michelin-star recognition is Band of Bohemia. I strongly suspect that, in the next Michelin Chicago Guide, the Ravenswood restaurant will have company.

Moody Tongue, in its spacious new South Loop digs, combines a serious, large-scale brewing program with the cuisine of chef Jared Wentworth, who, through his stellar work at Longman & Eagle and Dusek's Board & Beer, has had considerable success in capturing the Michelin Man's attention.

Careful readers of my reviews know that I don't often discuss beer programs because I'm slightly allergic to beer, in a stuffy head sort of way. And so I rarely drink beer, except when duty calls.

And when the critical stakes are as high as Moody Tongue's ambition makes them, I call for backup — specifically, my colleague, beer writer Josh Noel, who evaluates co-founder and brewmaster Jared Rouben's work in more reliable and relatable detail below.

I'll say this much: There's a remarkable synergy between the food and the beer at Moody Tongue; every bite and sip speaks to collaboration and mutual understanding. And a couple of the pairings — the watermelon saison with a Chinese-influenced crab dish, and the lemon saison with the mussels (steamed in that same beer) — were inspiring even to this beer-phobic palate. I'll leave the rest of the pairings to Josh.

— *Phil Vettel*

## **The food**

Wentworth offers two menus at Moody Tongue. There's a 12-course tasting, priced at \$155 (which includes beer pairings), and an a la carte menu. My guess is that most people will pick a la carte, especially the first time out, so I'll start there.

The menu reads simply — few terms will induce head-scratching — but the dishes are executed with precision and uncommonly pretty presentation. Grilled octopus arrives as five medallions dabbed with saffron-lemon aioli, arranged in a slight curve on a bed of slow-simmered eggplant and chickpeas, and chunks of morcilla sausage. Beet tartare is magazine-cover pretty, a tall disk of smoked beet topped with spruce-infused ricotta, gelled egg yolk and mustard seed.

Bread plays a large role in both menus; Wentworth is playing off the beer-is-liquid-bread saying. Crusty, toasted sourdough plays nicely with that smoky beet tartare; chicken liver mousse is paired with a yummy pecan toast. And the mussels, mentioned previously, are matched to wide slices of toasted baguette smeared with black-garlic aioli.



Celery root rotollini features pasta rolled tall and filled with celery root and ricotta. (John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune)

I'm particularly fond of the rotollini, contributed by sous chef Emily Phillips. The pasta pieces are like oversized tortellini, rolled tall and filled with celery root and ricotta. Brown-butter solids are scattered at the base, while Parmesan foam and slivers of black truffle sit on top.

Main courses include an exceptional dry-aged pork chop with pears, cabrales cheese and fennel conserva, and an imaginative bouillabaisse with prawns, mussels, striped bass, and a scallop-mousse and king crab cannelloni. What's rapidly becoming a signature entree is the skillet-fried chicken with black-truffle cavatelli; it's a good chicken, but it didn't curl my toes the way the pork and bouillabaisse did.

The tasting menu gets off to a rousing start with a trio of single bites: A puffy gougere topped with smoked-bass mousseline and arctic-char roe, an oyster with kalamansi vinaigrette and a tall samosa of butter-crisped phyllo filled with ground lamb, topped with a dab of yogurt and finger lime.

In rapid succession come chawanmushi topped with lobster and shaved truffle, and a fanciful nigiri of madai (sea bream) draped with lardo and topped with sea urchin, wrapped in braised kombu (in lieu of nori).



Madai is draped with lardo and topped with sea urchin, wrapped in braised kombu. (John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune)

Seared foie gras with pain d'epices and fruit is a fairly common composition, but Wentworth switches things up with his fruit choices — umeboshi, gooseberries, satsuma and cranberry gel.

About two-thirds into the menu, there's a palate cleanser — in my case, pieces of caraway pretzel with a puddle of beer cheese, since changed to black-truffle focaccia with house-made citrus butter — more fun with bread.

Meaty contributions are very impressive; there was pork belly on a bed of Carolina Gold rice with pumpkin puree; squab with wonderful caramelized endive and cassis sauce; and American Wagyu with carrot puree, maitake puree, salsify and a teeny Yorkshire pudding.



Pastry chef Tucker Critchfield manages some nifty desserts. For the tasting menu, he contributes a lime-pineapple sherbet (with a toasted-rice lager pour-over), brown butter spongecake with sweet-potato ice cream and gooseberry conserva, and bittersweet chocolate cake with toasted-rye ice cream, topped with a shower of micro-shaved, smoked foie gras.

On the a la carte side, Critchfield offers the spongecake with slightly different accompaniments (burnt-honey ice cream and date puree), a rich and satisfying dark-chocolate cremeux with cocoa nibs and devils-food crumble and, my favorite, a colorful take on ambrosia made with charred pineapple, lime sherbet, milk jam and coconut foam.

In addition to the beers that accompany the tasting menu, there's a list of the brewery's current releases (with very little duplication) on the back of the a la carte menu. There's also a legit wine list, with bottles and by-the-glass pours. Beer and wine lovers can coexist at Moody Tongue quite nicely.

Service on our visits was exemplary, particularly on the night I visited with Josh. We briefly wondered which one of us had been recognized first, but it really didn't matter.

— *P.V.*

## **The beer**



The beer selection includes Aperitif Pilsner, from left, Roasted Cocoa Oatmeal Nitro Stout, Sour Raspberry Framboise, Hazy Mango Pineapple IPA, Salted Gose, Sliced Nectarine IPA and Bourbon Barrel-Aged 12-Layer-Cake Imperial Stout. (John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune)

In an evening of memorable moments during Moody Tongue's 12-course, beer-pairing journey, one moment is particularly acute.

It's the fourth stop of the \$155 evening: Kaluga caviar, served with rich oyster panna cotta and paired with a beer called Salted Gose.

Gose is a German-style wheat beer that features salt as a prominent, if unlikely, ingredient. The result is an ale that's lightly tart, lightly briny and deeply refreshing when done right.

For that fourth course, Rouben — who often, though not always, handles beer service for the pairing menu — explains the beer's German heritage and its unique ingredient. It makes for a seamless pairing with the salty caviar and sweet panna cotta, he explains.

Rouben then finishes the short introduction by spooning a tiny amount of house-made salt foam into the glass and stirring it in. Beer lovers familiar with gose will appreciate the nod to brewing history. Those less familiar with the style will be dazzled by the dramatic flair: *Salt? In beer?*

It's a small, dynamic touch in an evening filled with sensory revelations. It also underscores Moody Tongue's goal of creating rarified fine dining inside a brewery.

Moody Tongue generally succeeds with The Dining Room at Moody Tongue, and on multiple levels: the quality of the beer, its thoughtful presentation and its place beside Wentworth's bold and uncompromising menu.

Some of the beer pairings — 12 beers across the 12 courses, plus a bottomless side pour of pilsner — work better than others. But complaints are few.

A key to dining at Moody Tongue, though, is that the same can be said of the a la carte side of the equation, The Bar at Moody Tongue.

Wentworth applies a similar approach to The Bar at Moody Tongue as he did at Longman & Eagle and at Dusek's: rich, hearty dishes transcending mere pub fare that happen to pair brilliantly with beer. It's the kind of food that hums just as well beside a crisp pilsner as next to a Belgian-style sour ale.

Some degree of pairing guidance on the bar menu — there currently is none — would serve most diners well. Asking the servers for recommendations is always a smart bet, though, and ours were well informed. But so, too, is following your instinct; I landed on one I can't wait to try again: the bright, zesty Steeped Emperor's Lemon Saison alongside the grilled octopus.

Neither the fine dining nor bar concepts would work if the beer didn't back up the ambition. The good news is that Moody Tongue — which, like many breweries has had highs and lows over the years — is making some of the best and most consistent beer of its six-year existence.

The velvety Roasted Cocoa Oatmeal Nitro Stout, at an approachable 5.7 percent alcohol, is a perfect hole to crawl into on a winter evening. Sour Cherry Belgian Ale is lush and fruity, pleasantly sweet but tempered by the tart cherries. Toasted Rice Lager is an endlessly drinkable gem: crisp, refreshing and lightly fruity.

Though you can eat and drink perfectly well in the bar, the real journey lies on the fine dining side. The experience begins with a beer unavailable on the bar side: Pressed Asian Pear Saison, presented in place of what would be Champagne for most pairing menus. It's earthy and fruity and without much sweetness, tuning the taste buds to the evening ahead. It also happens to be a faultless food beer when the first course of "snacks" arrives. (They're quite likely the most decadent snacks you've ever had, especially the lamb samosa.)

Not every pairing is seamless; I wasn't a fan of the madai and Freeze Dried Black Lime Wit, but that one has already been tweaked. In place of the wit is now a barrel-aged sour saison spiked with lime.

But they mostly succeed, whether to contrast (the lush Sour Peach Belgian Golden alongside the exquisite seared foie gras) or to complement (Bruleed Banana Dunkel Weizenbock beside pork belly is an elegant melding of sweet, creamy, meaty, savory and salty).



Co-founder and brewmaster Jared Rouben often, though not always, handles beer service for the pairing menu. (John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune)

The last dinner course is the burliest: American Wagyu served with Oak Barrel-Aged Flanders Red Ale. Rouben calls it “the burgundy of beer.”

“If you’re not going to have burgundy with beef, you might as well have the burgundy of beers with beef,” he says.

It’s an excellent pairing made all the more enjoyable in the context of beer as a replacement for wine. There are so many layers of flavor at work, and they tie together beautifully: tart fruitiness mingling with savory beef (not unlike wine).

At that point, we’d been served nine beers in nine types of glassware.

The dark horse hero is the constant side pour of Aperitif Pilsner, refilled as if it were a water glass. I drank plenty of it

across the two-hour meal — probably the equivalent of four 8-ounce pours. It was an ideal addition: a crisp and unfussy palate cleanser between courses.

Moody Tongue is so devoted to its beer pairings that the pairings extend through dessert. I’m generally a skeptic of pairing beer with dessert, but Moody Tongue mounts a valiant effort.

There’s genoise made with brown butter alongside Bourbon-Barrel-Aged Chocolate Barleywine (a big pairing that works) and two pours, Scotch-Barrel-Aged Peated Scotch Ale and Bourbon-Barrel-Aged 12-Layer-Cake Imperial Stout, alongside bittersweet chocolate cake (a big pairing that didn’t work as well, especially the massive Scotch ale).



The best was the simple refreshment of lime-pineapple sherbet paired with that wonderful Toasted Rice Lager, but not beside it. Instead, the beer is poured over the sherbet tableside: a tidy, crisp and creative finish befitting an audacious evening of beer and food.

— *Josh Noel*

## **Moody Tongue**

2515 S. Wabash Ave.

312-600-5111

[moodytongue.com](http://moodytongue.com)

**Tribune rating:** ★ ★ ★

**Open:** Dinner Tuesday-Saturday, lunch Saturday

**Prices:** Entrees \$16-\$42; 12-course tasting menu with beer, \$155

**Noise:** Conversation-challenged

**Ratings key:** ★ ★ ★ ★ outstanding; ★ ★ ★ excellent; ★ ★ very good; ★ good; no stars: unsatisfactory. The reviewer makes every effort to remain anonymous. Meals are paid for by the Tribune.