

Venison Tartare, \$15,
Jimmy Papadopoulos,
Bellemore, Chicago.
RECIPE, plateonline.com.

JIMMY PAPADOPOULOS

RESTAURANT **Bellemore**
LOCATION **CHICAGO**

by Liz Grossman

If you were scrolling through Instagram last fall, you likely spotted a three-bite, \$65 slice of oyster custard pie topped with an ounce of caviar, possibly the most photographed dish in Chicago. Not only was the elegant starter a social media success, it was also delicious, and the dish that got Jimmy

Papadopoulos the job as executive chef of Bellemore. But long before what Papadopoulos jokingly calls his “bougie bite” dominated social media, he had already captivated diners’ lenses—and palates—with something a little more simple: the homey Hungarian chicken paprikash he was known for cooking at Chicago’s Bohemian House. “I had never

cooked European food. I didn’t know what the hell I was doing and I kind of just made it work,” says Papadopoulos, who came from a suburban steakhouse to open the trendy, Eastern European restaurant four years ago. “I just stuck with the ethos of cooking with fresh ingredients and cooking from my heart to make it work.”

And it did work, as he collected



TAYLOR CHOWLEY

Q+A

What is your pet peeve in the kitchen?

When people show you that they don't genuinely care to improve. When I'm at work, I strip my mind of a couple of things and one of them is the feeling of "I'm doing a good job." I literally walk around the kitchen in a state of "healthy paranoia," and it forces me to look at all of the things I don't feel are as good as I want them to be. To me, that's the perpetual feeling of improvement. Yes, living like that sucks because you're always walking around with a pit in your stomach. And you always feel it, but every once in a while, you stop and enjoy where you're at, but you still have to continue to push.

accolades during his two-year stint there. But toward the end, he felt stagnant. "I left and didn't know where I was going. It was a complete bottom," he says. The time off gave him a chance to connect with his family and take up fishing,

a passion he still turns to to recharge. "When I was a kid I used to fish, but once I started focusing on my career, I realized I didn't have a single hobby. I'd go home, drink beer, eat, sleep, wake up, see my kids, go back to work, and repeat." After

a much-needed year-long break, he was ready to get back in the kitchen.

"In a chef's life, that doesn't happen," Papadopoulos says about the break. "You're usually working until you retire, if you have a chance to retire."

He jumped when given an opportunity to do a tasting for Boka Restaurant Group owners Kevin Boehm and Rob Katz, and since joining them to open Bellemore, has gone from seasonal pierogies to an equally soulful tasting (and à la carte) menu of dishes like venison tartare with turnips, yuzu kosho onions, and pickled pear (\$15, recipe, plateonline.com), fluke with cucumber jus, BBQ veal sweetbreads with crème fraîche-marinated kohlrabi, and other dishes that introduce layers of flavor, color, and texture that linger long after you eat them. "Our dishes are always evolving," Papadopoulos says of his menu. "Whenever we feel like we've seen a dish go out of the kitchen too much, then we see different ingredients coming in, and we start to create [something new] from them."

What hasn't changed since Bellemore opened is another signature dish: housemade Hawaiian rolls slathered with ham fat, an idea that came to him one Thanksgiving. "I was sitting across from my wife and we were eating King's Hawaiian rolls and I said, 'I'm going to make these, but do them badass. We'll make them super fluffy so they're almost like cotton candy.'" The glistening rolls are a playful fixture on the menu, and become even more indulgent when slathered with butter made from cream he cultures in-house with shaved country ham. That's how Papadopoulos approaches all his food. "I look to build dishes off flavor combinations and delicious food memories, and try to add just a touch of finesse, heart, and soul."