

EVAN DANNELLS

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FOOD & DRINK

Hot pockets: 8 Madison spots for steamy dumplings

By Victoria Davis, Special to the Cap Times
Feb 15, 2024



Madison is a hot spot for dumplings whether they're fried or steamed, served in soup or with soup inside, folded, stuffed, vegetarian or meat-filled.

RUTHIE HAUGE

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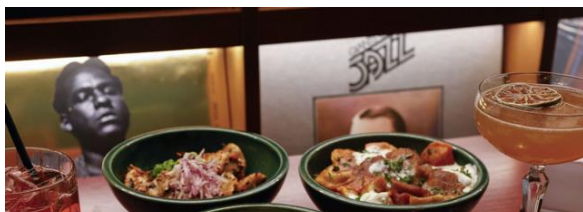


From sandwich-style pork bao and crispy gyoza to tomato-saturated Tibetan rolls and potato-stuffed ravioli, there are near infinite ways to make dumplings. Even mochi ice cream is technically a dumpling (but that's another story for another time).

Madison is a hot spot for hot buns. Local chefs get creative with traditional dishes, making already delicious dumplings even more mouth-wateringly wonderful.

Honestly, in our efforts to create a list of the best dumplings in Madison, it was tough to keep it to only eight.

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COOKING with THE CAP TIMES

February 13, 6:00 pm

EVAN DANNELLS

of Cadre and Lola's Hi/Lo Lounge

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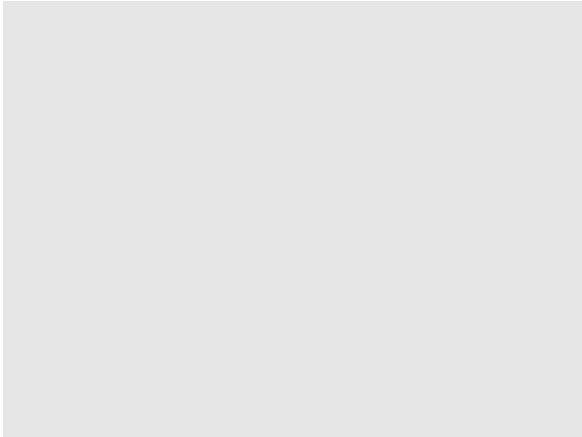
Three kinds of dumplings are available on the menu Lola's Hi-Lo Lounge: Chinese pork and chive, lamb and potato pelmeni, and butternut squash ravioli.

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As we ventured around the city doing what we do best (eating), we found that though dumplings are typically associated with Asian cuisine, this is a truly global dish, with dumpling derivatives found all over the world.

For example, **Lola's Hi/Lo Lounge** (617 N. Sherman Ave.) has a great Italian dumpling — the butternut squash ravioli (\$12).

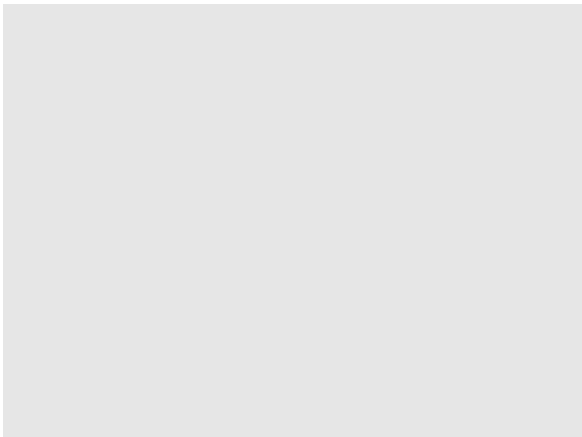
“We couldn't build a menu with a dumpling category without a nod to Italy,” said Evan Dannells, **co-owner and executive chef of Lola's**. “This dish features a very simple but flavorful roasted butternut squash filling, and then tossed in a pesto rosso (red pesto), which is a less commonly known pesto variant popular in Sicily.”



Lamb and potato pelmeni are topped with adjika, creme fraiche, sumac and fresh mint at Lola's Hi-Lo Lounge.

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The ravioli is then topped with house-made ricotta, Sartori SarVecchio parmesan cheese and toasted almonds. It's a flavor-rich addition to Lola's Russian pelmeni and more quintessential pork and chive Asian dumplings, known as “gyoza” in Japan and “manti” in Central Asia. These, like the ravioli, are 100% made from scratch in-house.

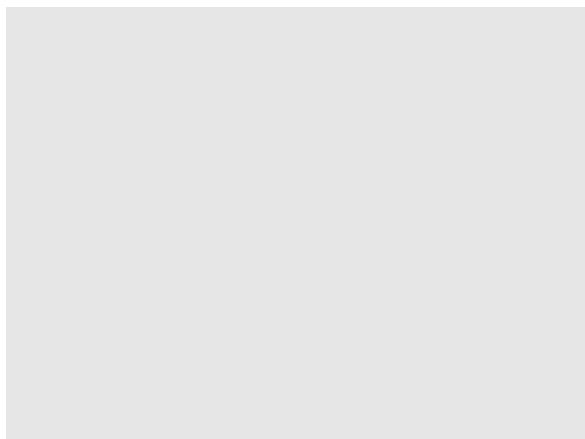


Dumplings and noodles are the main menu items at Dumpling Haus at Hilldale Shopping Center.

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When it comes to gyoza, few do it better than chef Jenny Yin at **Dumpling Haus** (540 N. Midvale Blvd). Yin has been serving crispy dumplings like the Haus Stickers (\$10) out of Hilldale Shopping Center for almost 25 years, having learned to cook from her mother-in-law. In many ways, Yin considered it a better education than going to culinary school.

Pan-fried with a choice of pork, chicken or veggie, the potstickers are accented by sesame oil and aromatic Chinese cooking wine.

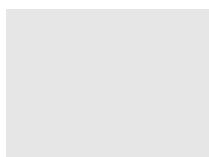


Haus stickers are filled with the customer's choice of pork, chicken or vegetables at Dumpling Haus at Hilldale Shopping Center.

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Bring on the bao

Zen Ramen (4674 Cottage Grove Road), along with its own pan-fried gyoza rendition, also has a more open-style kakuni bao (\$8.99) on their menu. Kakuni bao, or pork belly buns, involve a Japanese recipe that co-owner and chef Tyler Wan learned while studying how to make ramen for two years in Osaka.



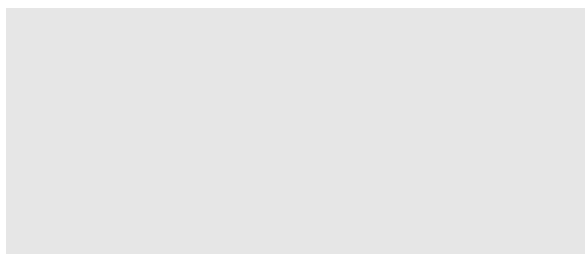
Gyoza are one of the appetizers at Zen Ramen on Madison's east side.

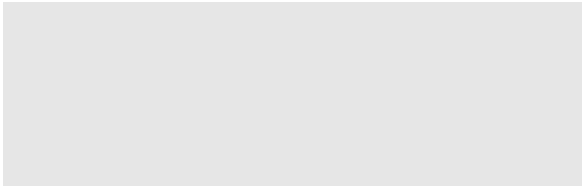
RUTHIE HAUGE

“The pork is slow-cooked until it becomes tender, typically in a mixture of soy sauce, sake, sugar, ginger and other aromatics,” Wan said. “This pork is then served in a soft, steamed bun, often accompanied by ingredients like pickled vegetables, cucumbers and hoisin sauce.”

The appeal of kakuni bao, Wan said, lies in the contrast between the tender, flavorful pork and the fluffy texture of the steamed bun.

“The slow cooking of the pork ensures it’s rich in flavor and melts in the mouth, while the bun provides a neutral background that complements and absorbs the pork’s juices,” he said.



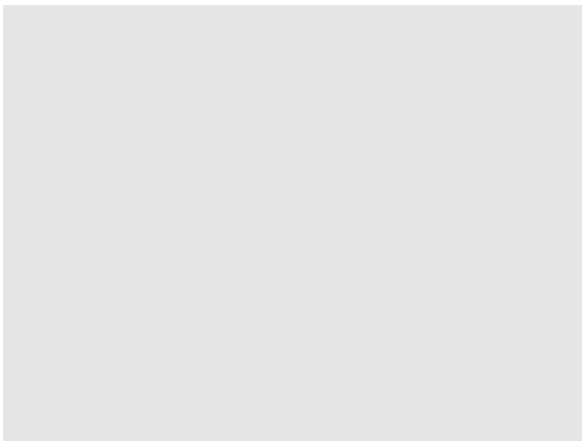


Kakuni bao are buns filled with pork belly at Zen Ramen.

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Unlike most dumplings, kakuni bao is folded like a sandwich or a taco, so the insides are exposed and easily cooled off. Soup dumplings, on the other hand, should come with a warning label.

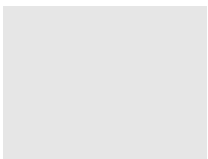
Also called xiao long bao, these dumplings are exactly what they sound like — delicate dumplings filled with hot soup. They glean their name from the cooking tool used to make them, a xiaolong, or small bamboo steaming basket.



Soup dumplings are filled with broth and steamed at Feast, an artisan dumpling and tea house on Willy Street.

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Feast (Artisan Dumpling and Tea House) (904 Williamson St.) has three kinds of xiao long bao soup dumplings: pork (\$8.95), pork and crab (\$12.95), and pork and black truffle (\$12.95). It's not a bad idea to puncture the dumpling first and let the soup steam out a bit before eating. Soup dumplings can be very hot.



Steamed shrimp shumai at Feast are filled with black tiger shrimp and Berkshire pork.

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“It’s all about freshness,” [said Mike Wang, owner of Feast](#). “Our soup dumplings are filled with premium Berkshire pork and homemade chicken broth. We enjoy making everything from scratch with freshness and love.”

“No matter how busy or slow, we grind our meat fresh every day, we make the

dumpling dough from three different flours and mix the dumpling filling daily and never use the same mixes for the following day.”

Spices from Nepal, vegan options

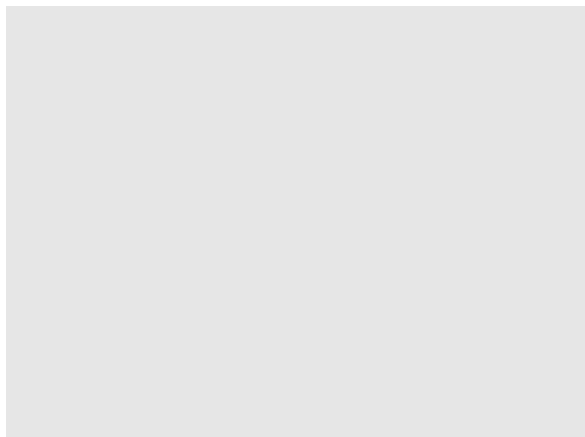
Diners slurp soup from inside Feast’s dumplings. Other places, like **The Globe** (309 N. Henry St.), fry the dumplings and place them in a bowl of soup.

Like **Little Tibet’s momos** immersed in sesame and tomato sauce, **The**

Globe's Tibetan fried dumplings are served in jhole (tomato chutney soup). The soup is homemade with with cilantro and sesame, and the dumplings can be either vegetarian with soya balls (\$6-\$10) or stuffed with chicken (\$7-\$11).

"Our Tibetan dumplings are our top sellers," said owner Ashim Malla. "We've had people come from Janesville and Milwaukee saying they dreamed about our dumplings and had to come get them."

The Tibetan dumplings are also Malla's personal favorite item. "We make more than 2,000 dumplings a week by hand and get our spices directly from Nepal."



Tibetan dumplings come with tomato chutney soup or plated at The Globe in Madison.
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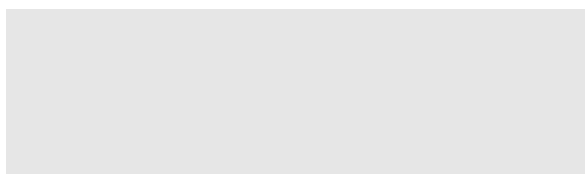
For those looking for an entirely vegan option, **Umami Ramen & Dumpling Bar** (923 Williamson St.) serves customers soft, pillowy dumplings that, unlike the steamed Chinese buns containing milk powder, are made with only wheat flour, water and salt. These are filled with five-spice smoked tofu and an assortment of veggie ingredients, from Taiwan cabbage to sweet potato starch noodles.

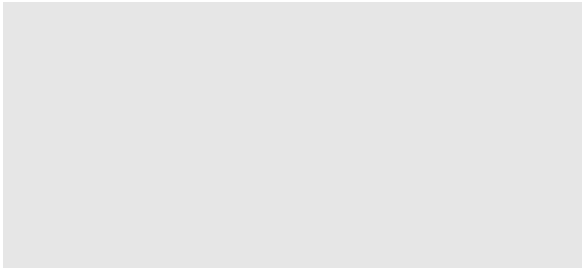
According to the noodle bar's owners, Mike Ding and Wendy Kuo, "Umami's dumplings are hand-rolled daily and cooked to order by searing one side and then steaming the other, providing a nice texture contrast of crispy and chewy.

"My wife and I are both Taiwanese," Ding added, "and these dumplings are special to us because they are adapted from family recipes we used to make growing up on holidays and special occasions such as the Chinese Lunar New Year."

'Like the Ukrainian grandmas make them'

Joining Asia and Italy's lineup of scrumptious dumplings, **Touch of Ukraine** (2438 Winnebago St.) brings an Eastern European style to the table with pelmeni, filled with ground pork and beef. The varenyky (also known as pierogi) are filled with mashed potatoes and topped with fried onions.

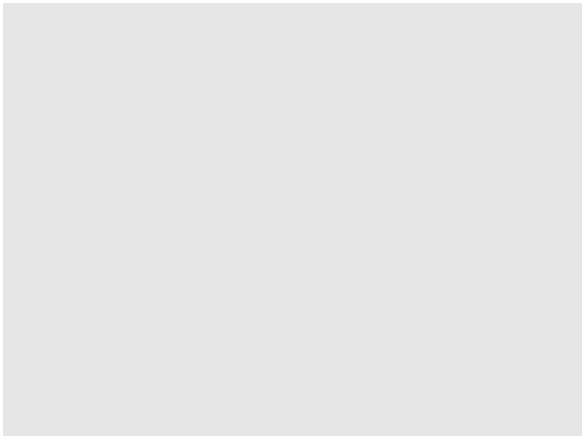




Varenyky are dumplings filled with mashed potatoes and topped with fried onions at Touch of Ukraine.
RUTHIE HAUGE

“Our Ukrainian kitchen staff make our dumplings exactly how they make them back home,” said Katya Temchenko, who manages Touch of Ukraine. “They are made according to the traditional recipes passed down over centuries, so they are warm, comforting and flavorful like all the Ukrainian grandmas make them.”

Across the Black Sea, residents of Azerbaijan have their own versions of pelmeni, which is what inspired the menu at **Caspian Grill** (610 Junction Road). Locals, particularly college students, may be more familiar with **Paul’s Pel’meni**, but Caspian Grill’s lesser-known dumplings are worth a taste or two (or three, who’s stopping you?). Fillings can be chicken, beef or lamb (\$9.99).



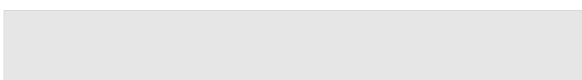
Pelmeni is stuffed with ground meat and served with sour cream and hot sauce at Caspian Grill on Gammon Road.
RUTHIE HAUGE

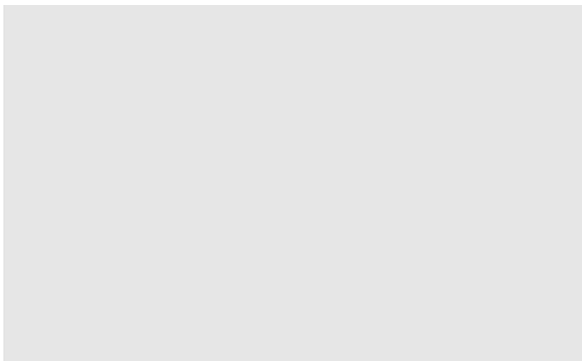
“Pelmeni is Russian, Ukrainian and Middle Eastern, and everyone makes them a little differently,” said Irene Gelfand, co-owner of Caspian Grill. “Our recipe is simple, like one used in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and, of course, Azerbaijan.”

Finally, for dessert, there are even more dumplings. Caspian Grill makes lovely, sweet varenyky (\$9.99), smaller sized little pockets, each filled with warm, juicy cherries.

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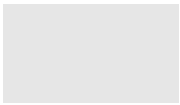


From bao to varenyky: Madison in 10 dumplings
Madison is a city stuffed with good things.

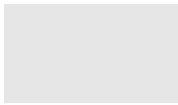
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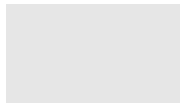
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