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At Black Sheep, the Pizza Crust Can't Be Topped

By James Norton Wednesday, Nov 12 2008

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The most perfect pizza crust in the metro area is available for a reasonable price at the newly opened Black Sheep Coal Fired Pizza in the Warehouse District. This is the evenly cooked, New York-style crust that memories are made of: both crispy and chewy, substantial without overwhelming its toppings, elegantly browned with bits of carbon blackening its bottom. It's not one of those Spartan cracker crusts, nor is it one of those inelegant wads of dough that make deep-dish pizzas the favorite food of the terminally ignorant. It's the elusive happy medium.

Black Sheep is the project of Jordan Smith, once the chef at Mission American Kitchen and Bar.

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Pivoting to a project perfectly suited for brutal economic times, Smith has put together an affordable menu (12-inch pizzas start at \$7, 16-inch pizzas at \$9) that combines high-class ingredients in unpretentious yet satisfying ways.

The pizza that will have you knocking down the door comes topped with meatballs. You will (rightfully) initially fear grease, or giant hunks of meat, or dull flavor, but the pizza arrives at the table suffering from none of the above. Instead, beautifully browned meatball pieces dot each slice with something resembling real restraint, making for rich mouthfuls that don't overwhelm any other part of the pie.

Black Sheep also deserves applause for offering anchovies as a topping choice. In the pizza world, these sad-sack sea dwellers are the equivalent of Limburger cheese or ouzo, despised by many for their flamboyant and pungently outsized personality. As it turns out, anchovies really work: They're salty as hell and sweetly funky, aggressive playmates for the sauce, cheese, and crust. They will not be popular in all circles. They will be beloved by some.

An odd half-success on the menu was a fennel sausage and green olive pizza that curiously lacked kick, its ingredients tame compared to the rich, high-quality cheese and satisfying crust. Fortunately, this is a problem that's easy to fix. Sausage can (and in this case, hopefully will) easily be dialed up in spice and flavor.

Details

BLACK SHEEP COAL FIRED PIZZA

600 Washington Ave. N., Minneapolis
612.342.2625

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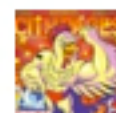
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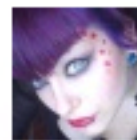
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Dessert at Black Sheep is a one-item list—a \$5 ice cream sandwich. Consisting of a thick layer of vanilla ice cream spread between two big, house-made chocolate chip cookies, it's a meal-ender big enough for two people and good enough for anyone. The cookies have strata, not chips, of chocolate, every bite rich with dark, masculine cocoa flavor, assertive enough to be heard over the lovably insipid sweetness that defines the ice cream.

When a chef phones it in, pizza is a lowbrow crowd-pleaser, a carbohydrate bomb for the lazy cook and indiscriminate diner. When the man at the oven puts his heart into the pie, however, the result is marvelous to behold. That kind of wonder is what Black Sheep is peddling, one 12- or 16-inch pizza at a time.

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