

# Food



## Hot Dish By Morgan Smith

### In the flock of pizzerias, Black Sheep stands out

Kristina Lawson, the general manager of Black Sheep Coal Fired Pizza, thinks that husband-and-wife co-owners Jordan Smith and Colleen Doran made a smart move when they opened their pizzeria at 512 N. Robert St. in downtown St. Paul 2½ years ago. “They got in on the ground floor of this neighborhood’s development,” Lawson said.

The Penfield, a new apartment complex that has risen kitty-corner from the Black Sheep, is slated to open by the end of the year after having languished in the planning stages for close to a decade. A portion of the Penfield’s first-floor retail space will be occupied by Lunds, the first full-service supermarket in downtown St. Paul in many years. And once the construction equipment is gone, the vacant lot across the street is slated to be turned into Pedro Park.

“We were lucky to come in when we did,” Lawson said, “before everything is finished, like the Saints stadium. It’s been a blast to be a part of the community-building process, and the support we’ve gotten has been great. We see the same people three to four times a week.”

The centerpiece of both the Black Sheep on Robert and the original Black Sheep in Minneapolis’ North Loop neighborhood is a massive anthracite coal-fired oven. The anthracite, which is mined in Pennsylvania, burns more evenly at higher temperatures and for a longer time and is cleaner than other forms of coal, according to Lawson.

“The first American pizzerias on the East Coast were coal-fired,” Lawson said, but the practice waned in favor of other



The fennel sausage, hot salami, onion and cracked green olive pizza served at the Black Sheep in downtown St. Paul.

PHOTOS BY JANET HOSTETTER

cooking methods. In fact, “Black Sheep’s are the only coal-fired pizzerias in the Midwest,” she said, “thus making it the black sheep of pizza parlors.”

Owners Smith and Doran have had a little fun with the concept, adorning all of the tables in each of their restaurants with red sheep except for a single table with black sheep. Beyond that, the St. Paul restaurant is sparsely decorated with just a few eclectic art pieces hanging on the walls.

On my first foray to the Black Sheep, I was accompanied by my pal Cheryl and my wife Mecca. We initially ordered the Meatballs appetizer (\$8.50) and a House Salad (\$7). A creamy Italian dressing accompanies the House Salad, which is very fresh and could easily have served four. The dense pork-beef meatballs come with a glaze that looks somewhat like ketchup. While that may not sound particularly appetizing, they were darn good. Even my recovering vegetarian wife wanted to order them on a subsequent visit.

For our main course, we went with a 16-inch, build-your-

own pizza. Patrons going this route usually start with the Cheese & Sauce Pizza (\$7.25 for a 12-inch, \$13.50 for a 16-inch) and add from there. The choices for toppings range from artichokes and anchovies to Kalamata olives and pickled peppers. We opted for the chicken and white mushrooms, which are \$3.50 each on a 16-inch pizza.

The pizza came out more quickly than we had expected, and as we figured from what we had seen coming out of the oven, we were all genuinely pleased. With a firm crust and just a little of the burnt crust typical of wood-fired pizzas, this coal-fired pizza is about as good as it gets, with fresh ingredients that don’t fight with each other and don’t get smothered with too much sodium.

As we left the Black Sheep, the staff—from our server to the greeter to the guy feeding the oven—said “thanks” and “good-bye.”

On our second visit, Mecca and I once again ordered a house salad and a build-your-own pizza, this time with Canadian bacon and fresh tomatoes. Mecca actually thought there was too much Canadian bacon on the pizza, to which I replied in the immortal words of Wallis Simpson, the Duchess of Windsor: “You can never be too rich or too thin—or have too much Canadian bacon on a pizza!”

Once again on the way out the staff thanked us for coming.

Finding ourselves in the neighborhood a third time, we stopped in yet again and ordered Black Sheep’s Mozzarella and Ricotta Calzone (\$17.50) after making sure that it would feed the two of us. Our server explained that the calzone is basically a 16-inch pizza folded over, so it would be plenty for two or three. Mecca wanted to add meatballs, but we compromised with fennel sausage and fresh tomatoes (\$3.50 each).

Now it was my turn to say I thought it had a little too much ricotta and not enough mozzarella. The good news is, the marinara dipping sauce was chunky and fresh and the fennel sausage quite tasty. But we both agreed the pizzas were better.

As we left, I thought no one was going to thank us, but just as we reached the steps, sure enough, the staff thanked us and said good-bye. For those of you who haven’t been keeping track, three visits sets a new record for the most times I’ve ever made to a restaurant before writing a review.

It shouldn’t be hard to figure out why.



A chef removes a pizza from the coal-fired oven at the Black Sheep in downtown St. Paul.

## Tidbits

**Dick and Pat Trotter** of Trotter’s Cafe, 232 N. Cleveland Ave., received the annual Minnesota Cooks Jon Radle Award from the Minnesota Farmers Union at this year’s State Fair in recognition of their commitment to furthering awareness of local foods and sustainable agriculture.

**The Twin Cities Veg Fest** will take place from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday, October 26, at Coffman Memorial Union on the campus of the University of Minnesota. The festival is a free event for omnivores, vegetarians and vegans

alike, and the first 1,000 who show up will receive a free gift bag. Last year’s inaugural Veg Fest drew more than 1,200 people. This year’s event will feature exhibitors, live music and free vegan food. Guest speakers will include Nathan Runkle of Mercy For Animals and Nick Cooney of Farm Sanctuary. Twin Cities Veg Fest is a program of Compassionate Action for Animals. Visit [TCVegFest.com](http://TCVegFest.com).

**Madtown Munchies** has opened in the old Sweets Cupcakes location on Marshall and Cleveland avenues, and is offering late-night

delivery (no walk-ins) of gourmet sandwiches, warm cookies, dessert crepes, ice cream and more. Madtown Munchies was started in Madison in the fall of 2006 by St. Paul native Jeremy Neren. Deliveries are typically made in 30 minutes or less by bike or electric vehicle. For online ordering, visit [stpaul.madtownmunchies.com](http://stpaul.madtownmunchies.com).

**128 Cafe**, 128 N. Cleveland Ave., has a new owner. Jill Wilson sold the restaurant and its food truck in August to chef Max Thompson. Thompson, who grew up in Minnesota,

worked at Cafe Boulud in New York for three years as well as other restaurants on the East Coast. He also spent a season as an instructor at a cooking school in Tuscany. He most recently was the sous chef at Butcher & the Boar in Minneapolis.

**The Mill City Museum**, 704 S. 2nd St., Minneapolis, will offer “White vs. Whole Wheat: A Tale of Two Flours” at 2 p.m. Sunday, October 27. The program is included with museum admission of \$6-\$11. Call 612-341-7555 or visit [millcitymuseum.org](http://millcitymuseum.org).