



Pie-ous

By Michael Nagrant

JESUS DOESN'T TAKE NAMES.

You insist he write yours down, but the swarthy host at the Chicago Pizza and Oven Grinder Co. folds his arms, suffocating his short necktie, and says, "No names. Just faces." You don't believe him. Who would? There's like a football stadium worth of folks lined outside the restaurant and down Clark Street. No way he's gonna remember. But, what can you do? No matter what Kanye West says, Jesus doesn't walk. You do. To the back of that really long line.

You've been in lines like this before. You've even relished them with a fanaticism your friends don't understand. Your love of food is a fetish to them, up there with Leonard Nimoy worship. But they don't know. Hell, you've gotten drunk, partied in these lines and made friends waiting for a table to open up at Frontera Grill and Uglesich's in New Orleans.

Still, you wait. You watch Jesus like a hawk. Dude knows what he's doing, and never really forgets a face. Photographic memory? If so, somebody needs to get him a set of encyclopedias and a spot on Jeopardy.

A couple gives Jesus a hug. Though they've arrived afterward, Jesus sits those people before you. That's his prerogative. If you like the pizza here, you too will hug Jesus on the way out.

Jesus beckons. It's your time. You have scored one of the 38-year-old booths near the front. The place is covered in honeyed knotty pine. Dark, low-slung and outfitted with lanterns, the dining room looks like a hobbit cottage from *Lord of the Rings*. You discover the place opened in 1972, thus confirming why it looks like a hippie veggie joint from Berkeley or Ann Arbor.

Though you love and think you know food, you've never heard of this place, and are here only on the kind recommendation of a couple named Jill and Tom. Maybe they know Bonnie and Clyde, for the restaurant slung away on the garden level has a speakeasy quality. There's even a tuxedoed barkeep in the penguin get-up. Rumor has it that the place once served as a lookout post for the St. Valentine's Day Massacre gunners who did their dirty deed in a now-long-gone garage across the street.

You know the pizza might take a while, so you commit the senseless act that everyone else does at pizza parlors across America and you order (more) bread. A huge Dumbo-ear-like flatbread spilling over its tiny plate like a beer-bellied middle-aged man arrives. It is a cross between Ethiopian injera and Greek pita, and is doused with a blend of spices so secret that Colonel Sanders is jealous. The spices come from a shaker that the waiter produces, and doesn't leave at your table for long. Folks unable to figure out what besides oregano, thyme, dried garlic, peppers and salt are in the blend generally rip the shakers off. You might too if you weren't so busy shoving this hot beauty in your face. When you're done, the table is littered with the spice blend. Just as you think they should hand out mini-Swiffers, Jesus sweeps the table with his hand.

Though it says "pizza" on the masthead, there is no such thing. What you get instead is what might happen if a spaghetti Bolognese, French onion soup, and a sausage pot pie made love. A waiter overturns a piping ceramic crock laden with a halo of pizza crust and lifts the crock off like a stuffy French waiter snapping off a cloche dome to reveal a bubbling gooey carpet of cheese. You dig in with your fork to find a lava flow of garlic, onion and winey-perfumed tomato sauce studded with bits of prime Boston butt pork sausage. It is good. It is more satisfying than anything Gino, Malnati or Giordano has given you. Burt, Vito and Nick, and Marie still have an edge. You are positive that Domino's Pizza stole their pasta bowl idea from this "pot pie."

You're even more convinced, for the airy submarines, or oven-grinder loaf. The texture here is reminiscent of Domino's oven-baked sandwiches, though it is ten times better. You are shamed that you ever order Domino's. You like the pizza, but you love the orgiastic pile of smoked ham, Genoa salami, Swiss cheese, anchovies, pickled red pepper, beef-steak tomatoes, Romano cheese and garlic oil on this sub. You were trying to be adventurous, but the anchovies stink up the booth like a pile of rotting Asian Carp. You will have the kitchen hold them next time.

There is only one dessert: balls of rum-infused ice cream crusted with crushed macaroons and toasted almonds. With a boozy addictive sweet like these, who needs two? Before you leave, Jesus drops by, and he memorizes you for all time. You may not wait in line ever again. For this, you happily whip out a wad of cash, for, like names, Jesus doesn't take credit cards.