

# eat & drink

Clockwise from top left:  
Scottish Curry, Taco  
Luchador, Pierogie and  
Traditional poutines  
ANDREW A. NELLES/  
PHOTOS FOR REDEYE



# GET SAUCED

**Sloppy fries abound at Wrigleyville's The Big Cheese Pouterie**

**By Michael Nagrant** | FOR REDEYE

God help you if you're a stoner and you live anywhere near the intersection of Clark and Roscoe streets. There you'll find The Big Cheese Pouterie, a new purveyor of a munchies-sating and artery-threatening dish known as poutine. Though the name itself sounds, well, less than appetizing\*, poutine is a snack made from French fries crowned with cheese curds and gravy, thought to be invented in Quebec in the 1950s.

If you've never had poutine and you don't live in a climate where consuming carbs

could mean the difference between survival and freezing your ass off, you might think it sounds gross. Keep in mind, though, that a 2007 Canadian TV documentary named poutine the 10th greatest Canadian invention of all time. Insulin (No. 1), the artificial pacemaker (No. 6) and the electric wheelchair (No. 9) all outranked poutine, which seems appropriate considering you might need all three at some point should you consume a regular diet of poutine.

Canadian restaurateur Travis Burke certainly agrees with that ranking. He was so

## The Big Cheese Pouterie

3401 N. Clark St. 872-206-8749



Off to a good start

enamored with poutine that he brought the dish from Quebec to Calgary, Alberta, where he opened up two Big Cheese locations. Now he's partnered with two local restaurateurs, Rocky Aiyash (Pazzo's) and Michael Stad-

nicki (Al's Beef at 601 W. Adams St.) to open the first U.S. location in Wrigleyville.

Big Cheese isn't the first poutine-centric restaurant to open in Chicago—technically, that distinction belongs to now-closed Bad-Happy Poutine Shop—but it does focus on a dish that other restaurants just dabble in. “Most places serve sandwiches with a side of fries,” Aiyash said. “We serve fries with toppings. It’s a total curveball.” I stopped in to find out if Big Cheese indeed was a curveball or just a lazy toss of questionable food to the impaired denizens of Wrigleyville.

\* This is because most Americans pronounce the dish “poo-teen.” The correct pronunciation actually sounds more like the Russian president’s last name, Putin.



Sodas from The Pop Shoppe

**Drunk food of the gods**

The whole point of poutine is excess and richness; expecting balance from poutine is like hoping a Chicago mayor governs transparently. So I ordered a bunch of poutines and just dug in like I was hammered. What I discovered is that the poutines at Big Cheese might just be the finest drunk food around. The curds squeak against your teeth, the sweet basil-flavored gravy is thick and beefy, and the skin on the fries, which are hand cut daily and fried to order, are on par with the best spuds in town.



**WHO IS BIG CHEESE?**

He's the mustachioed wrestling villain that serves as the restaurant's mascot. Look for him featured in vintage-style images on the walls where he's performing various feats of strength and visiting local landmarks.

**Death by carbs and meat**

The selection of toppings available beyond the traditional gravy and cheese curds are a collusion of carbs against the waistline. There are dollops of gooey mac 'n' cheese (\$6.99 for a small; \$7.99 for a large) and juicy ground beef, guacamole, pickled jalapenos, salsa, sour cream and Fritos on the Taco Luchador (\$7.99 for small; \$9.99 for large), which is basically ballpark nachos with golden fries taking the place of stale chips. There's also the Pierogie poutine (\$7.99 for small; \$9.99 for large) adorned with bacon, caramelized onion, sour cream and a couple of Polish potato dumplings. There's the aptly named Notorious P.I.G., featuring root beer- and chipotle-sauced pulled pork, bacon and Italian sausage. I also tried a Scottish Curry poutine (\$7.99 for small, \$9.99 for large), featuring pulled chicken dripping in sweet, aromatic curry gravy dotted with bright green peas.

**Housemade pays off**

Many of the toppings and sauces are made on site from scratch, including those crispy-crustied pierogi, which are made from Stadnicki's mother's recipe and are probably good enough to launch their own franchise. Though I couldn't taste any root beer in its sauce, the pulled pork was silky and spicy. The mac 'n' cheese noodles were firm, and the pulled chicken on the Scottish curry was tender and smoked in-house. Because

of the addictive savory quality of the curry and the tender pulled chicken on the Scottish poutine, I gobbled it up more than the others. Even though Big Cheese is counter-service, the staff was friendly and quick, and one of the workers stopped by to ask how my food was. My only major gripe? If you dine in, your poutines will be served in cardboard takeout containers, which means the fries steam against the side of the cardboard and get soggy quickly. Why not curb the problem by using real plates for dine-in orders? Aiyash and Stadnicki said they're still considering how best to present poutine to in-house diners, but recommended ordering your fries "extra crispy" if you like.

**Top of the pops**

Big Cheese has a soda fountain (\$1.99 with free refills) stocked with the unusual flavor of Fanta ginger ale (Who knew this existed? It's not as spicy as Vernors, but I liked it) and a selection of bottled sodas (\$2.99) from Canada's The Pop Shoppe. I especially liked the neon green-hued Lime Ricky flavor, which tasted kinda like the love child of Mountain Dew and a margarita.

**Bottom line**

If you find yourself at Big Cheese soaked in Old Style after a Cubs win, or just stone-cold sober in search of comfort food, you will be pleased by this poutine.

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