

eat & drink

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

Constraint is often the mother of invention, and it's nice to know that Chicago winters don't dampen the entrepreneurial spirit. At least that's the picture Nida Rodriguez, owner of The Slide Ride food truck, paints of her new Avondale french fry emporium, Frite Street. "Mobile has its difficulties," she said. "Ultimately, I wanted a space where if it's 30 degrees below zero, we didn't have to feel like we had to drive around the city to make money." Frite Street sounds like a nice warming shelter from the storm, but would it also bring the culinary heat? I stopped in to find out.

The scene: The crimson-painted dining room is outfitted with a butcher block-style table that's slightly too high for the low-slung seating. As I dug into huge white cardboard takeout boxes of fries (each loaded with more than a pound of potatoes), I felt a little like a tiny Alice nosing up to the giant banquet table of the Mad Hatter. Billed as a "french fry dive," Frite Street's iron-barred front window, white ceramic tile sullied by the dirty footprints of recent customers and crate of \$1 vinyl LPs definitely live up to the description. Chef de cuisine Chris Graham is a record junkie, and that bin serves as the restaurant's soundtrack, spun on the player located behind the counter. Mid-meal, Graham put on a scratchy side of vintage DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, whereby Will Smith gave props to all the Philly MCs that inspired him. At a minimum, I now know who to blame for "Gettin' Jiggy Wit It." Not everything here is dinky, though. A smattering of obligatory Eiffel Tower iconography and a quote from Audrey Hepburn that reminds all who dine that "Paris is always a good idea" lend some brightness.

The frites: You know what's also always a good idea? French fries, aka frites. Frite Street mostly reinforces that fact by serving up pretty awesome frites that are sea-salted, blanched and double fried so that the inside is puffy and the outside is crispy. So many spots serve a slightly fatter-than-a-shoestring fry that sogs under all the toppings. The choice to go thicker is a smart one in the case of the Korean frites (\$7), where slabs of crispy pork belly, tangy kimchi and creamy garlic aioli would ruin any lesser fry. They might even be better than the kimchi fries I've always liked at Lakeview restaurant Del Seoul.

On paper, the chicken-fried frites—butter-

milk-battered, deep-fried frites served with a side of bacon-studded gravy (\$7)—sound like a stoner's dream. In reality, the fried crust is dusty and reminiscent of that weird coating you sometimes find on frozen seasoned fries, though the silky gravy would make a flaky biscuit pretty happy. The best gravy on offer is the curry-infused one served on the Curry Jane frites (\$5). Beefy, thick and spicy, the dish is almost like a french fry shepherd's pie, minus the peas. The only problem is after about 10 minutes, the salty gravy blends with the thick crystals of sea salt on the fries, devolving into an over-salty mess. The solution? Eat 'em fast.

The sliders: Though fries are usually a side

HOLY FRITES

Food truck The Slide Ride dedicates a spin-off storefront to fries



Plain Jane frites
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE



dish to burgers, the opposite occurs here. You can order three of The Slide Ride's most popular sliders (\$3 each) as "slider sides." They are beefy beauties grilled medium-pink and perched on fresh, tiny sesame-studded buns baked by Highland Baking in north-suburban Northbrook. The Guinness slider is a perfect little package topped with goey provolone, Guinness-infused onions and horseradish sauce. A barbecue pork slider featured melt-in-your-mouth braised pork with a sauce that was a little too cloying, something the pickle slice on top couldn't offset.

The service: Counter maven Angelica Apodaca—with fire-engine red lipstick, a sing-songy voice and a big bow in her thick ringlelet-adorned hairdo—rocks the vintage pin-up girl look. She was attentive and

helpful, offering up dipping sauces (I really liked the banana ketchup) and details about off-menu specials. "That's her personal style," Rodriguez said. "We knew her from another food truck. When she came in to interview with us, she wore this vintage red dress with black polka dots and looked a little like the French girl in our logo. She was made for this."

Bottom line: With a few exceptions, Frite Street serves up some serious french fry fantasy and a side of pretty good sliders. File this under "Another score for Avondale" alongside Honey Butter Fried Chicken and Kuma's Corner.

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