



Grits at Baker Miller
LEHMY GILMORE/REDEYE

WORTH A TRIP

GRITS

Baker Miller, 4510 N. Western Ave.

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

There are restaurants, and then there are respites. It's tough to say whether Baker Miller, a newish Lincoln Square shop from the former Bang Bang Pie Shop partners Dave and Megan Miller is a restaurant. They bill it as a bakery and millhouse, but there are no glass cases showcasing pies, cakes and pastries—though they do sell those things via a chalkboard menu and a utilitarian metal rack tucked behind the counter. There's a restaurant-like brunch offering hearty bacon, sausage, oatmeal and savory tarts. There are brews worthy of the most discerning coffeehouse (from Sparrow Coffee Roastery in the West Loop) and a butter and jam bar featuring spiced maple butter and riesling jam to slather on slices of the daily baked bread offering (\$3.95).

Whatever Baker Miller is, the one thing I can say for sure is it is most definitely a respite. The only way I can seem to get warm right now is thinking of my recent visit there, when the kitchen heat left clouds of steamy condensation on the glass windows and the conviviality of Lincoln Square lawyers and Logan Square literati mingling over thick icing-swirled cinnamon rolls (\$3.25) truly warmed me from the inside out.

The food also does its part in keeping one stoked, none more than Baker Miller's grits (\$9.50). One of my kitchen staples, after salt and pepper, are Anson Mills artisanal grits, often thought to be the best in the country. But Baker Miller's are creamier with a contrasting finishing bite. "We don't treat

them [with alkali], which removes protein and makes them brittle and dry," Dave Miller said. "Also, we don't sift them. A lot of people sift out the finer particles after grinding, but I found those super-fine particles led to the creaminess." The corn is a blend of two types from Wisconsin and Illinois farms that lend different sugar and starch contents to create the perfect texture that lands on the plate.

It doesn't hurt that the grits are topped with aged parmesan, juicy bits of chuck roast braised in Baker Miller's housemade giardiniera—think the best bunless Chicago-style Italian beef ever—a perfectly jiggy soft-boiled egg and tangy pickled red cabbage. The grits are one of the best bowls of comfort in this cold city right now. Though technique has a lot to do with the greatness of the finished product, the grits' roots as a labor of love and nostalgia might have something to do with the quality as well. "I grew up in central Florida, which, while people don't think of it as the South, it is as southern as it gets. We eat frog legs and grits," Dave Miller said. "My go-to breakfast was always two overeasy eggs, grits and sausage. When I moved here, I went to a diner and ordered that without even looking at the menu. The waitress was like, 'Oh, honey, we don't have grits here.' ... It kind of boggled my mind. I realized no one was really eating grits on the North Side of [Chicago], so I made it my mission to bring that here."

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR.
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