

## eat &amp; drink

★★★★★  
Heating up  
**SMALL CHEVAL**  
1732 N. Milwaukee Ave.



# Who you calling small?

**Au Cheval offshoot's 'dollar smaller' burger passes the taste test**

**By Michael Nigrant** | FOR REDEYE  
“I was not prepared for the response.” That’s Hogsalt Inc. founder Brendan Sodikoff—the man behind Gilt Bar, Maude’s Liquor Bar, High Five Ramen, Green Street Smoked Meats, Bavette’s and Au Cheval—talking about his newest venture, Small Cheval. In its first week of operation, the burger-centric offshoot of Au Cheval was teeming with long

lines. It seems like an odd statement coming from a guy whose career has been built on lines. After all, if Sodikoff opens a restaurant and there’s no line, does it even exist?

As I interviewed Sodikoff for this piece, I asked him why the self-serve soda at Small Cheval is served in an old Coleman cooler instead of the vintage refrigerator that he used at Roxie’s By The Slice, which previously inhabited the space. “The door opened the wrong way,” he explained. “If you were in line, you had to reach back across people to open it from the left. It didn’t feel right. Because the fridges were so old, there are no parts to

change the way it opened, so I scrapped it in favor of the cooler.” Sodikoff might be one of the most detail-oriented restaurateurs I’ve ever met. When a guy pays attention to how a fridge opens and the impact it has on his restaurant, it’s hard to believe that he didn’t know how big Small Cheval would launch.

Then again, Sodikoff’s success is also based on the fact that he hasn’t yet rested on his laurels. He’s humble and hungry. Few would close a pizza place (Roxie’s) that was eventually doing hundreds of orders a night. But Sodikoff doesn’t do good enough. “I want a feeling of enthusiasm and excitement,

from myself and my staff and my leadership team,” he said “I don’t have a fixed formula. I’m not reviewing daily P and L [profit and loss]. I believe in long-term sustainability. ... I want to open places that connect with people for a long time, and Roxie’s didn’t have that feeling.”

I stopped in recently to see if Small Cheval’s long lines were emblematic of the recaptured feeling Sodikoff craved or if they’d soon fizzle out because of unmet promise.

## The scene

On a recent Wednesday at 6 p.m., the line to

order was 30 deep. The candy-colored assortment of Adirondack chairs on the back patio were stuffed with every stripe of Bucktown and Wicker Park citizenry, including blue-shirted consultant-looking bros, moms and their light-up-sneakers-wearing progeny and a couple of tank-top-clad dudes sporting Joakim Noah-worthy topknots.

### The burger

Like Au Cheval's, the Small Cheval burger is basically the quintessential backyard burger made by your dad. It's a satisfying stomach massage of greasy, peppery beef oozing with the very finest in food processor ingenuity whose richness is cut by the perfect acidic onion and pickle component, all smushed between a master baker's bun.

If you only deal in specifics, that's a toasted glazed brioche-style bun from Lincolnwood's Z Baking Co. slathered with lemon juice and dijon mustard-infused mayo that enrobes a couple of angus beef patties from WW Johnson Meat Co. topped with tangy house-made pickles and chopped red onion (\$8.95). If you're feeling frisky—and you should be—add a blanket of melted Kraft American cheese (\$1) and a few planks of thick-cut pepper-flecked bacon (\$2) to complete the package. The Small Cheval version is, as Sodikoff told me, “a dollar smaller” than its Au Cheval counterpart. That refers to the literal price tag and size. Small Cheval's bun and meat have been reduced slightly to achieve a better portability and easier edibility.

Small Cheval doesn't offer a fried egg option like Au Cheval does. Sodikoff said there was much debate about that, but he decided against it for the short term because Small Cheval offers take-out and he didn't want someone getting home to a burger bogged down in custard. While I love the egg option at Au Cheval, putting the runny egg on a burger teeming with this much lustrous mayo is sort of like making chicken-fried bacon. It sates the base hedonism found in most every good foodie, but it's not necessary.

If you can't tell, I love this burger. One of my complaints about Roxie's was that while the slices were good, I knew I wouldn't crave them on a Friday night like I would a slice from Pequod's. The complete opposite is true here. If I want a quick, satisfying burger fix, Small Cheval will likely, more often than not, be the destination.

### A deconstruction

That being said, because I'm a critic who gets paid to eat in ways no normal human would, and because this is, like, my seventh “Cheval” burger this year, I took some time and tried each element separately. Each piece held up pretty well. A cynic might quibble at Kraft



Chocolate shake



Cheeseburger with fries



cheese, but like Sodikoff says (and as a product of the same generation, I totally agree), “Small Cheval is about authenticity, quality and history: My childhood was sort of in a transitional period. As a kid I liked American cheese. That's what was in the fridge. That's what I ate. That's very nostalgic.”

The one thing I think could be improved is the beef. It was well-seasoned, deeply caramelized on the griddle, and on three out of the four burgers we ordered, cooked medium-rare (one was well-done). But it didn't have that mineral tang or grassiness you might find on a locally raised Slagel

Family Farm dry-aged patty. But the Small Cheval patty, smothered by thick slabs of bacon and all that perfect mayo, is proof that the sum truly is greater than its parts. “I buy about 2 million dollars in beef a year,” Sodikoff said. “We spent a lot of time tasting options that could provide that much beef with consistency and quality, and for \$8.95, that's a great burger. For \$16, \$17 or \$18, we could serve beef that's dry-aged or hand-chopped, and that's the kind of thing we do at other spots or will do in the future. But that's not my intent here. We want to connect with a broad group of people.”

### Shakes and fries and drinks

Fries (\$2.95) are almost mahogany colored, well salted, double fried and served in wax paper bags. They have a slight softness, so if you're a golden crispy McDonald's-like fry aficionado, you might not love these. But if you like a rustic skin on fries in the style of Al's Beef or the now-defunct Hot Doug's, you'll love them.

The chocolate and vanilla shakes (\$3.95) on offer are both frosty and rich, but the vanilla, which displays flecks of real vanilla bean, was my favorite. If you're looking for a refreshing limey summer cocktail with a touch of peach perfume, don't miss the peach gimlet (\$12).

### The service

It's counter service, but the night I visited, the woman behind the register apologized that the credit card machine had stopped working and that the restaurant was cash-only. Unbidden, she picked up the tab for our drinks as compensation, which was a kind gesture.

### Bottom line

Lovers of Au Cheval's burgers now have a spot to grab that same great burger outdoors on a rockin' patio while sipping peach gimlets and listening to the low rumble of the passing Blue Line. Though, unfortunately, if the early opening lines are any indication, the wait for the burgers here at Small Cheval won't be much shorter than they are at Au Cheval.

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