

eat & drink



Huevos rancheros pizza

Upper crust

Robert's Pizza Company is a unique addition to Chicago's busy pizza scene

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

B lame it on a motorcycle. A 1972 Triumph Bonneville, to be exact. Tired of taking it to numerous gas-station mechanics to be fixed, marine engineer Robert Garvey took the bike apart—all the way down to the very last bolt—so he could understand how the thing worked. He put it back together and then drove the bike cross-country to visit an old friend in Colorado.

It was just one of many times Garvey would obsessively examine something to figure out what made it tick. Garvey eventually moved on from motorcycles. As a Chicago transplant by way of New York, he couldn't find a slice of pizza he loved here.

"I was like, 'How hard could it be? It's flour, water and yeast,'" he explained. "So I started baking pizzas at home. My first one was terrible. The ones after that were even worse."

So began a 20-year quest of discovery, deconstruction and, ultimately, the creation of his own divine dough. Garvey experimented with Neapolitan, California and Chicago styles. He even trained at the Scuola Italiana Pizzaioli, becoming a certified Pizzaioli. He baked in wood ovens, steel ovens and brick ovens. The quest ended with something he calls "Za Dough" and the recent opening of Robert's Pizza Company in Streeterville.

The scene

If you want to see what that Triumph looks like, it's been mounted in all its gleaming glory over the restaurant's host stand. In fact, when I called Garvey to interview him, he asked if he could call me back because he was installing a serious piece of equipment. While I waited for him, I imagined him test-driving some newfangled dough mixer, but it turned out he was just mounting the motorcycle. I asked him what he thinks when he looks at the bike now, assuming he'd throw out some nostalgic gem. Instead he laughed and said, "That I need another motorcycle."

The rest of the industrial-skewing tri-level space is full of chocolate-brown wood tables, exposed columns and brick. The room was filled with a mix of families and the post-work Loop crowd.



Fennel sausage with
caramelized onion

RATINGS KEY

- **** DEAD UPON ARRIVAL
- **** PROCEED WITH CAUTION
- **** GIVE IT SOME TIME
- **** TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT
- **** OFF TO A GOOD START
- **** HEATING UP
- **** ALREADY HOT

The food

The thing that really excites me is when a chef has a unique point of view. Having eaten more pizza than any single other type of food, I thought I'd seen everything. But Garvey's crust—the result of a three-day cold fermentation and 575-degree gas-fired brick oven—is unique. It has the blistered, crusty edges of a Neapolitan pie and the thinness and sharp angles of a New York slice. But what really sets it apart is its flaky crispness. These slices don't droop and sag at the tip; they crack when you fold them. Best of all, they maintain their integrity when they're cold or reheated in a toaster oven, something I did two days in a row with my leftovers. It's rare that I eat a slice that tastes as good the next day as it did when it came out of the oven.

"Dana [Garvey's wife and business partner] says 'We love dough responsibly,'" Garvey said.

Indeed they do. That crispness is contrasted with a bubbled interior that looks like the innards of a fine croissant. It eats like a slice of artisanal sourdough. You won't leave this crust on your plate.

There are tons of set flavor combinations on offer, but I started out with my own construction of fennel sausage, caramelized

onion and a mix of cremini, shiitake and oyster mushrooms with a tomato-sauce base (\$21.50 for this pie, but price varies based on toppings). The sausage is cooked before it's tossed on the raw pizza dough to avoid slicking the pie with grease. The golden-hued onions have been cooked for over four hours and offer a sweet and jammy component to balance out the deep, earthy perfume of the mushrooms. California tomatoes are used to make the sauce, a conscious choice by Garvey over Italian San Marzanos, which are often thick, sweet and pasty. These tomatoes are bright and acidic, offering a nice counterpoint to the richer ingredients. A base of fresh cow's milk mozzarella is a creamy addition. Yes, this is a fancy pie, but it comes with a substantial crave factor. I would be happy eating this pizza every Friday night while watching the Sox.

Even fancier is a pizza dotted with roasted red grapes, fennel, walnuts and tangy taleggio cheese (\$20). I loved the bright woody aroma of the walnuts and pungent sweetness of the concentrated grapes, but I wanted an acidic component here—perhaps a spritz of lemon or a drizzle of sherry vinegar.

The huevos rancheros pizza (\$18) is dripping with black beans, fresh chorizo, tomatillo-spiked salsa verde, salty queso fresco and spicy cilantro leaves. The whole thing is topped with a few over-easy eggs, creating a hangover helper or stoner's dream come true. This pie is almost perfect, but the eggs tasted like they weren't salted and muted some of the flavorful elements below. When I mentioned this to Garvey, he suggested that I should have pierced the egg yolk and mixed it around before grabbing a slice, something our server didn't mention when the pie arrived.

By now, you might know that I'm perplexed by the breadstick paradox at pizza places. Why do people order breadsticks with dipping sauce as an appetizer before they eat more bread with tomato sauce in the form of pizza? Thankfully, Garvey doesn't offer breadsticks, which forced me to go for a plate of meatballs (\$8) dripping in that bright acidic marinara sauce and roofed with shaved mozzarella. These days, many people grind meatballs so finely that the end result is like eating a sponge. The veal and beef blend here is coarse like chopped steak

and stuffed with focaccia crumbs. Woodsy, spicy bits of thyme pop with each bite.

You could also go the lighter route in favor of a seasonal salad (\$9) with leafy ribbed bibb lettuce, crisp apple slices, toasted hazelnuts and salty bits of pecorino glistening with a sharp apple cider vinaigrette.

The drinks

There's a decent selection of wines by the glass, but I stuck to a pint of Moody Tongue Sliced Nectarine IPA (\$7). It's a delicate brew with a lilt of hoppiness, but instead of that big grapefruit bomb you're used to getting with an IPA, the nose here boasts gentle, peachy lemon notes that pair nicely with the apple and hazelnut salad.

Bottom line

Garvey has created a unique pizza crust that's worth seeking out. That's no easy feat in a city that has an endless supply of pizzerias. Some of the set flavor combinations need a little tweaking on seasoning, but many are perfect. And yeah, the meatballs are pretty great, too.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED, AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.

MINI-REVIEW
Robert's Pizza Company
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★★★★★
Off to a good start