

eat&drink



Cooler Ranch French fries
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE PHOTOS

worth a trip

Cooler Ranch French fries (\$3)

SmallFry, 2489 N. Milwaukee Ave. 773-661-1365

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

The seasoning on Cool Ranch Doritos is magical. As such, I follow a very particular ritual when I eat a bag of the chips: I grab each morsel with the same hand over and over again until every last piece is gone. There are no napkins used along the way, and if I've done my job correctly, a red- and green-speckled residue coats my fingertips. In a glorious finale, I lick that seasoning off each finger, savoring the tangy, salty, vegetable-bright mix to the very end. Gross might be the first word that comes to mind, but don't lie to yourself. I know you do this too—and if it's not with Cool Ranch Doritos, it's probably with Cheetos.

Because I do this on a regular basis, I've often wondered why Frito-Lay hasn't bottled up the seasoning and stocked it next to Old Bay Seasoning and Lawry's Seasoned Salt at the grocery store. Imagine the possibilities: Cool Ranch-seasoned pizza crust. Cool Ranch bacon. Cool Ranch-dusted doughnuts. OK,

that last one is a stretch, but you get what I'm saying.

The good news is that while I wait, Egan Quinn and Colin Kelahan—two friends who met as freshmen at DePaul University—have concocted their own version of Cool Ranch dust at SmallFry, their gourmet-influenced fast-food joint in Logan Square. It's a mix of dehydrated buttermilk, roasted and dried vegetables and a healthy sprinkle of dill, and they call it Cooler Ranch. The mix changes seasonally based on what vegetables are around, and as such, their current version doesn't have that distinctive red bell pepper I associate with the bagged version.

But that doesn't matter. The stuff is addictive and even better sprinkled over thrice-fried French fries. (The first low-temp fry cooks the innards to a fluffy consistency, and the second crisps the exterior. The fries rest and starch develops before the final fry, which produces that Belgian-style, mahogany-colored crisp.)

Once my order of fries disappeared, I scooped up the last of the Cooler Ranch dust with my fingers and ate it straight.

While one can certainly survive on French fries alone, SmallFry's Asian chicken sandwich (\$7) makes a fine accompaniment. The chicken is brined in pickle juice and buttermilk and then dredged in Wondra flour, resulting in a flaky golden crust and meat that's juicy to its core. The rich poultry is foiled by sweet and sour hoisin-like glaze and vinegar-pickled carrot, cabbage and radish slaw. And for their final trick, it's all stuffed inside a pillowy potato roll from Martin's Famous Pastry Shoppe, which Kelahan calls "the best frickin' bread ever."

Before SmallFry, Quinn spent time in the front of the house at Bohemian House in River North, while Kelahan worked for food delivery service Caviar. "We both spent a lot of time as kids eating fast food, but we also have an appreciation for the high-end and great restaurants around the world," Kelahan said. "SmallFry is our attempt to meld those two worlds." The two are doing a great job, serving up cement-thick milkshakes with strawberries and real whipped cream and an incredible corn dog with batter that's studded with jalapeño-



Asian chicken sandwich

and miso-roasted corn. The only real issue they've been vexed by as new restaurateurs is the power of Yelp.

"We have like two to three meetings a week about how Yelp is the worst thing ever created," Kelahan said. "Some drunk guy left a one-star review because we weren't open at 2 a.m. on a Sunday night. We never really stood a chance."

That being said, if Quinn and Kelahan can track down that guy and give him a few Cooler Ranch-dusted fries, I bet he'd have a change of heart.

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