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WORTH A TRIP

FRIED SHRIMP

Phil's Last Stand, 2258 W. Chicago Ave. 773-245-3287

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

I once ate about 15 pounds of fried shrimp in a single day. It was, as most of my digestive system-threatening binges are, an occupational hazard. I was in search of Chicago's best fried shrimp, and I found it at The Southside Shrimp House in Bridgeport. But that was before the White Sox had a championship and just a couple of years after the Cubs has squandered a chance at one. In 2007, the Shrimp House folded.

Though Chicago is no ocean paradise, we do OK with shrimp. Snappy's in North Center has huge fried shrimp. There's the fluffy golden shrimp at Troha's in Little Village. Frank's, a tiny local franchise with four locations around the Chicago area, features fried shrimp with a nice garlicky bite. But none of these places satisfied me like the shrimp from the Shrimp House.

That is, until Phil's Last Stand opened in 2012. Owner Phil Ashbach is known for his In-N-Out-style burgers, his charred pink hot dogs (flayed on both ends Maxwell Street-style so the casing doesn't burst on the grill) and for being a big gregarious, wisecracking old-school Chicago dude. But, there are plenty of superlative burgers, dogs and old talkers in this town. Shrimp, though, even at Snappy's, Troha's and Frank's, is just merely good.

Phil's shrimp (\$11 for a half pound; \$20 for a pound) is the whale's tail. They're soaked in buttermilk and egg, coated in crispy panko breadcrumbs and fried until the crust is almost tempura-like. These meaty shrimp possess a sweetness, a whiff of iodine and a kiss of brine.

At Phil's, they cook as many as 200 pounds of shrimp a week during summer. If you have any doubt about the commitment to shrimp, check out Phil's logo, which features a caricature of Ashbach dressed like General George Armstrong Custer sucking down a char dog while riding a bucking, grinning shrimp.

"When I started here, I thought they'd be some small popcorn shrimp from Sysco [a popular restaurant supplier]," said Bob Corbett, Phil's general manager. "But, then I found out we got jumbo shell-on shrimp from a big fish house near Halsted and Lake Street and was blown away. We shell and devein them all by hand in the back of the house." Corbett added, "Phil, he's a freak about food. He's 450 pounds. He ate shrimp everywhere and did his research. He knows what's good."

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE. REDEYE@TRIBUNE.COM | @REDEYEATDRINK