



diningout

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Reno's tatsy "Southern," is a Korean/Kentucky mash-up of salty country ham, sweet roast garlic, fiery fizzy kimchi and juicy tendrils of spinach. The specialty pizza house is at 2607 N. Milwaukee. | AL PODGORSKI-CHICAGO SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

'KILLER PIZZA'

"I shot a man in Reno, just to watch him die."
— Johnny Cash

There is no such murderous scenario at the new Logan Square cafe and restaurant named Reno, but there is killer pizza. Still, the name of the joint

Logan Square's Reno a hidden gem for thin-crust pies

is pregnant with meaning. While I ate at Reno, and then while I drove home after dinner, I couldn't seem to stop humming Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues," what with that pivotal lyric about a killing in "The Biggest Little City" in the world.

But as the floor of the restaurant reminds, in bright yellow lettering, Reno the restaurant is "Not Nevada." But then again you didn't need the warning to know that. Logan Square is the natural habitat for much of Chicago's hipster com-

munity, and Reno is its clubhouse of sorts. You almost feel guilty if you haven't worn your best flannel or grown a beard before visiting. There are a lot of dark eyeglasses, piercings and knit caps around as well. But there are also the young

families from the neighborhood, their toddlers gnawing on bubbly pizza crust.

The space — brick and rough woods, with tables built of knotty lumber and industrial black metal — has a Portland, Ore., feel. At night, after a few beers (I particularly like the lightly hopped cream ale, Sweet Action from Brooklyn



The house-made merguez sausage is satisfying as it sits on a tasty bed of lobster roe grits.

brewery Six Point), bathed in the light of the Logan Theatre marquee and the Chase bank across the street, I feel pretty good.

There's sort of a ski lodge-like warmth here. All that's really missing is a fireplace, unless you consider the wood-fired brick oven behind the counter. And from that oven comes Reno's best thing: puffy charred and chewy, thin-crust pizzas.

The dough here rises at the edges and droops slightly under the heft of gooey cheese at the center. This pizza is the cousin of the great Neapolitan pies served around town including those from Nella and Spaccanapoli. However, both those spots are strictly Italian, whereas the pizza slingers at Reno mine other exotic locales.

"The Hog," for example, filled with tender strings of pork belly carnitas, a tangy salsa verde and crumbly white cotija cheese is pure Mexico. My favorite pie is "The Southern," a Korean/Kentucky mash-up of salty country ham, sweet roast garlic, fiery fizzy kimchi and juicy tendrils of spinach.

A great pizza deserves a great salad, and the curly bitter frisee and sweet spinach salad wilted slightly by a warm sherry vinaigrette and topped with shaved mushrooms and a tangle of crispy fried leeks is a very nice companion.

There's another side dish of creamy grits tossed with fragrant and salty lobster roe finished

RENO ★¹/₂

2607 N. Milwaukee
(773) 697-4234;
www.renochicago.com

Hours: Monday – Thursday: 7 a.m.-11 p.m.; Friday 7 a.m.-1 a.m.; Saturday 9 a.m.-3:30 p.m. (brunch); 5 p.m.-1 a.m.; Sunday 9 a.m.-3:30 p.m. (brunch); 5-11 p.m.

Prices: bagels \$2.25; pastry \$2.75-\$4; breakfast sandwiches \$4-\$8; lunch sandwiches \$7.50; pizza \$9-\$14; pasta \$8-\$14; sides \$5-\$13

Try: Southern pizza, frisee spinach salad, grilled merguez sausage with lobster roe grits

In a bite: A decent Logan Square neighborhood breakfast and lunch spot, and a citywide destination for exotically topped thin crust pizzas.

KEY: ★★★★★ Extraordinary;
★★★★ Excellent;
★★★ Very Good; ★ Good;
Zero stars: Poor

with hunks of spicy house-made merguez sausage that's also very comforting.

I expected the rigatoni carbonara to provide a similar measure of reassurance. What could go wrong when marrying creamy Parmesan, silky fresh egg yolk, the richness of bone marrow and a salty sprinkle of pancetta and



A great pizza deserves a great salad, and the curly bitter frisee and sweet spinach salad with warm sherry vinaigrette and topped with shaved mushrooms and a tangle of crispy fried leeks delivers.

guanciale (cured pigs jowl)? Well, the rigatoni was limp and overcooked, while the egg yolk was lukewarm and a touch slimy and larded with blobby bits of gelatinous bone marrow.

Dessert wasn't much better. The crux of a great brownie sundae is the contrast of the hot fudgy cake and cool ice cream. At Reno, the brownie was dry, so crispy that it threatened to scratch the top of my mouth like the crust on an old piece of sourdough. The pistachio ice cream was runny and half melted by the time the plate arrived.

Reno also serves breakfast and lunch. Dessert was a harbinger of the disappointment I'd experience in the morning at Reno. At night, the servers are attentive. In the morning the counter staff is groggy. Most of what's on offer is baked goods and pastry.

I settle for a vegetarian quiche with mushroom and Gruyere and some savory brioche tangled around fat hunks of fennel-rich sausage and tangy mostarda. Both pastries are served cold. I think Reno should offer a warm-up option, maybe a quick heat in the wood-fired oven, for these items. The texture on the brioche is good, but cold, it feels a little like eating

lukewarm French toast. My standard for quiche is the incredibly gooey custard served at Hoosier Mama wrapped in flaky pie crust. By that standard, Reno's quiche which is more rustic and full of textured curd is decent, but not particularly memorable.

Much has also been made of the bagels at Reno by some of my colleagues. It's true, they're good, certainly better than most local options including the much-vaunted New York Bagel & Bialy in Lincolnwood.



Reno's bagels are decidedly crispy, inciting varied opinions from stalwart bagel lovers.

The crispness of the Reno bagel serves well when it's made into a sandwich. I very much like the crusty contrast against the soft lox, cucumber, avocado, artichoke, red onion and cream-cheese combo of the "Hook" breakfast sandwich. My only quibble is that the lox has been promised as seasoned with togarashi (a spicy Japanese chili seasoning), but there is no bite or discernible spice on my sandwich.

Bagel texture, like pizza style, is one of the more subjective things in food. There's so much nostalgia and experience with these items, that preference for a type is a very personal one. And for me, the Reno bagels are almost too crispy. I prefer the ones from St-Viateur in Montreal, which have a more golden ratio of crispy crust to airy chew. But I didn't want my personal bias to rule here, so I asked a colleague about her take on the Reno bagel. She summed it up best, saying, "It's just a bagel, you know?"

Michael Nagrant is a local freelance writer. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.