

# Daisies' father fodder

## THE LOGAN SQUARE RESTAURANT'S FOOD IS SIMPLY DELICIOUS

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

In the last few years, “dad rock” has been used as pejorative shorthand for critics to dismiss bands or music of a certain ilk. Such music is usually plaintive, nostalgic, seemingly simplistic, maudlin or sometimes just fringe complex and weird.

Classically, Steely Dan, Springsteen, solo early Paul McCartney, Crosby, Stills & Nash and other artists have been hit with the phrase. Lately, Wilco, Bon Iver, Blitzen Trapper and Mumford & Sons have been dubbed modern dad rock. Say what you will, but these bands rule.

Yeah, I'm a dad. I heard “Maybe I'm Amazed” when I was 10 and didn't know what love was. But, I sure thought I did after I heard Macca dig deep into his lungs. I wanted to be a captain of a ghost ship when I first listened to Joel's “The Down-easter ‘Alexa.’” I was probably 12. I unwittingly loved dad rock when I was a kid, and I love it, wittingly, now.

I thought of this because I've been a food critic for almost 12 years, and while I'm not super old yet, I'm old enough to remember the younger version of me who stalked fancy prix-fixe restaurants like The French Laundry or Alinea like some people go on tour with

Phish. I was fixated on food that was complex, artistic and technique-obsessed. I still love that stuff, much like I love Radiohead's “Kid A,” which is decidedly not dad rock.

In the last few years, though, that's just not how I eat on the regular anymore. What I yearn for more is perfectly executed simplicity—cacio e pepe pasta or roast chicken with a crisp skin bewitched to a beautiful brown.

I think I love something I'm now going to call—despite the fact that father fodder has a more alliterative quality—dad food.

Dad food is not a construction. It's a real thing. It is what many chefs cook as they



The pasta at Daisies is made by hand.



Chef Joe Frillman (right) with brother Tim Frillman of Frillman Farms.

mature. Think Paul Kahan's perfect fries soaked in beef tallow or Jason Vincent's shattering onion rings with a side of sticky barbecue ribs at Giant, for example. The restaurant that most recently crystallized for me this idea of dad food is Daisies in Logan Square.

### The chef

Daisies chef and co-owner Joe Frillman

has recently become a dad himself. His 3-month-old cooed in the background while I interviewed him.

Frillman actually started to hone his dad food aesthetic working with Chris Pandel back at the now-defunct Osteria di Tramoto in 2006, long before fatherhood. He described his approach at Daisies, saying, “You know how Thomas Keller says stuff gets boring after a couple bites? I don't

want to serve you huge portions. I want to make you a bunch of small, simple pastas that are all awesome, and you're going to want to order all of them, and they're small enough that you're going to be able to eat them all.”

### The room

The walls are adorned with beautiful naturalistic watercolors and illustrations of rainbow carrots, turgid morels and striated red onions created by Frillman's sister Carrie. Daisies' dining room looks a little like an art gallery featuring awesome “Gray's Anatomy”-style vivisections of veg.

There is also a dad-friendly turntable on the bar top, which happened to have a vinyl copy of Outkast's “Speakerboxxx/The Love Below.”

The back patio—featuring industrial plastic tubes filled with string lights, hanging planters and handsome wooden tables—has a backyard Chicago dad vibe. The only thing missing is a fire pit and Dylan on acoustic. This may sound like ironic dismissal, but it's pure reverence.

### The drinks

There are three rosés on offer on the Daisies' wine list. When I asked the server to describe them, she described each one with nuance, recommending the 2016 Timbre “Opening Act” California pinot noir rosé (\$9) which tasted exactly like the strawberries and bright acidity she promised. There are some really fantastic and





Lentil raviolo carbonara with ham, ramps and egg yolk.



Ricotta gnocchi with asparagus and chicken jus.



Cornflake chicken thigh, rutabaga latke, applesauce.

interesting bottles on this list, including a toasty sparkling blanc de blanc from L. Mawby (\$14) of, all places, Michigan. I once met Mawby, who, in addition to making great sparkling wine in the upper part of the Michigan mitten, once wrote a “choose your own adventure”-style experimental novel for his college thesis. Mawby is probably the epitome of dad rock wine-makers.

## The food

What’s more dad or family-like than partnering with your brother, a farmer, to provide produce for your restaurant? Indeed, many of Joe Frillman’s plates include vegetables from Tim Frillman of Frillman Farms in Prairie View, Ill.

“My brother had a corporate job, but we had this land, eight acres, that we rented out to Didier Farms. I told him he should farm it himself and make a go of it. We started buying his stuff at Balena. But then I left and they didn’t buy as much of it,” Joe Frillman said. “I felt bad. Farming is hard. He works his ass off, and I kind of screwed him. Part of the reason I wanted to start Daisies was so we could use his great stuff.”

Nepotism doesn’t always have a happy ending, but at Daisies it pays off. The planks of zucchini on one plate did not taste of water and air like most squash, but were grassy and herbaceous, floating above the bright and spicy acidity of Calabrian

chiles and creamy funk of Gran Mugello cheese (\$11). Although I enjoyed the dish, this was also one of the few missteps of the night, as the zucchini had been overcooked on the grill and was a little mushy.

And, what could be more dad-like than onion dip (\$6)? You know your parents put out a bowl of Lipton French onion dip with Ruffles every New Year’s Eve. My friend Harold and I were recently lamenting how every from scratch version of onion dip is never better than Lipton’s. Frillman’s version might be the exception, featuring not salty beef bouillon notes like Lipton, but the bright tang of sour cream and a caramelized Vidalia onion perfume. And, while I find Ruffles to be the perfect chip, Frillman’s house-fried, thin waffle-cut chips (the technical term for this cut is *gaufrette*—but that sounds more like a bad French mime) served with the dip had me wishing I could mow my way through another bowl of them long after the dip was gone.

Tender leeks splayed in creamy mustard hollandaise (\$10) had a splendid imitation bacon-bit-like crunch, courtesy of toasted and crumbled Publican bakery rye bread. The leeks could have used a touch more salt, but this was the kind of vegetable-centric dish that makes a carnivore believe they could happily renounce meat.

Oh, and the pasta! Unlike so many restaurants that use fancy extruders to

make technically perfect spaghetti, all of Frillman’s noodles are made by hand. They ooze the custard of golden yolks. Even pierogi (\$18), which is technically more of a dumpling than pasta, here has a pillowy noodle-like quality; a softness mitigated by a crumble of lemon butter-sautéed baguette crumbs. Paired with tender clams swimming in Moody Tongue lemon saison beer broth, it’s like a spectacular riff on moules frites with the clams as mussels and the pierogi as potato proxy for fries.

You will want to order all the pastas, including stracci (\$18), tiny napkin-like noodle shreds strewn with perfectly toothsome peas and lamb as tender as Justin Vernon of Bon Iver’s heart. But the one you will really want is the off-menu “kids noodle” tamarin (\$7, kind of like sharp-cornered spaghetti) tossed with butter and Parmesan. I brought my young son on this trip, a son who still only eats butter, cheese and pasta, exclusively. He is not a vegetarian, but a pastatarian. He declared it the best pasta he has ever had. He was not wrong.

There is also a cornflake chicken (\$17), which is sort of like a Japanese chicken katsu or a German schnitzel, where the cornflake crust acts like a panko breading and makes for a superior and epic chicken nugget. The chicken comes with minted rhubarb compote that has sweetness and acidity, a role often played by honey mus-

tard dip at your local franchise. Frillman could probably do a successful truck serving these chicken planks to drunk people on a late weekend night.

## The dessert

Everyone knows that with every great dad comes an even greater mom, and Frillman makes a tribute to his own mother with Nancy’s Kahlua cake (\$6) topped with strawberry compote. The cake is moist and a satisfying end to the meal, however, I yearned for a touch more coffee essence from the Kahlua. I think it might be better if Frillman splashed it with a little of the booze before service.

## The bottom line

Daisies is the ultimate in dad food—simple dishes made great. With no complexity to hide behind, the execution here has to be perfect and the ingredients well-sourced. A few things needed a hint of salt or a touch of something extra, but generally Frillman has succeeded in creating simple, satisfying fare from local produce. He is making some of the best fresh pasta in Chicago right now, and for that he definitely deserves a World’s Greatest Dad—er, Chef—mug.

*Michael Nagrant is a RedEye freelancer. Reporters visit restaurants unannounced and meals are paid for by RedEye.*