

THE SKINNY

## Black Sheep Pizza



Stacy Schwartz

By Steve McPherson July 28, 2009

Being firmly Midwestern, and so presumably more under the influence of Chicago's deep-dish paradigm, the Twin Cities have a surprising number of pizza joints that look farther east—as far as Naples for both **Punch** and **Pizza Nea**. But relative newcomer **Black Sheep** (which opened last October) sets its sights on replicating the authentic, coal-fired taste of America's very first pizzerias in Brooklyn and Manhattan. The result is a welcoming pizza joint, which is at once comfortable and artisanal, and sports salads as phenomenal as its pie—not to mention some of the best sauce you're likely to find anywhere.

**In the kitchen:** Chef Jordan Smith opened Black Sheep with his wife and co-owner Colleen Doran after manning the helm at **Mission American Kitchen** in the IDS Center, the **Downtowner**, and D'Amico & Sons. The emphasis is on no-nonsense fare, with a menu limited to salads, a few appetizers, and pizzas.

**The name:** The extremely helpful Aldo Gutierrez, who was managing the shop on a recent Sunday night, had the easy answer: It's the black sheep of pizza places in the Twin Cities, the only one to use a real coal oven to make its pizza. He says the coal makes for a very dry heat that makes the crust crispy, unlike wood-fired ovens, which impart the moisture from the wood into the pizza. The coal also kisses the crust with a dusting of char, which seems like another reason for the name.

**Eat this:** As good as the pizza is, you simply cannot pass up the Farmers Market Salad. It changes regularly: We had one with lettuce surrounding a mix of watermelon, Marcona almonds, thinly



Black Sheep Pizza owner Jordan Smith

sliced onions, basil, and olive oil, and an earlier visit yielded a salad rich with fennel, romaine lettuce, and asiago cheese. The pizzas come in two sizes (12- and 16-inch) and are simply great. The crust is as good as advertised, crispy while

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still pliable and smoky, but the real star is the sauce: Its rich red color and fresh, uncomplicated flavor shines on the No. 2 pizza, which is just tomato and oregano. The No. 5 is also notable for its savory fennel sausage and primo cracked green olives alongside onions and spicy salami. But truly, the less you can bear to pile on the pizza, the better: The interaction of the crust, the sauce, and the cheese jumps to the fore when you let it.

**Drink up:** A good selection of micro-brews, including Rush River's excellent amber Unforgiven and Surly's Furious and Cynic, are on tap, plus a selection of bottled beers. Glasses of house red and white are reasonably priced, and the most expensive wine tops out at \$40, but let's face it: You're probably just going to want a solid carafe of house red to go with your pizza.

**Mom, date, or pal?** Black Sheep is one of those rare places that can cater to all three. It's cozy and hip enough for a date, laid-back and affordable enough for a girls' or guys' night out, and straightforward and homey enough for the folks.

**Fellow**



Black Sheep customer Laura Sivert enjoys a pizza

**gourmands:** On a recent Sunday night, the place was mostly occupied by families, especially back in the wooden booths, which evoke both the simplicity of an old-school pizza joint and an urban bistro. But you're just as likely to see anything from garment-dyed tees and acid-wash jeans with white cross-trainers to guys in flashy suits to girls in thrift-store couture here.

**Economic impact:** The tap beers are all \$4.50, the glasses of wine \$5-\$7, and the pizzas range from \$6 for a 12-inch tomato and oregano pie to \$22 for a 16-inch concoction of oyster mushrooms, smoked mozzarella, and rosemary. Bottom line: You and a friend can split a 12-inch cheese pizza and each have a beer for under \$20.

**Vital stats:** Open 4:30 p.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday, and 4:30 p.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. 600 Washington Ave. N, 612-342-COAL (2625), [blacksheeppizza.com](http://blacksheeppizza.com).

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