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Poutine, a Canadian classic, becomes trendy in Chicago

BY DAVID HAMMOND February 18, 2013 8:35AM

I had my first taste of poutine — basically French fries, cheese curds and gravy — last winter in Quebec.

I'm not suggesting a cause/effect relationship (smile), but since I wrote in this column about my first encounter with the dish, we've seen a whole lot of poutine arrive in Chicago.

Poutine is on menus at several new restaurants: Little Market Brasserie (10 E. Delaware) upgrades this elemental dish with short ribs, while at Boarding House (720 N. Wells) you can enjoy an even fancier version with lobster.

The new BadHappy Poutine Shop (939 N. Orleans) specializes in just the one dish with lots of toppings, including truffle mayo and foie gras. In BadHappy's dining room, a banner proclaims "Sometimes you gotta be bad to be good," a motto suggesting the abiding allure of foods we believe are maybe not the healthiest.

Mention poutine to most people, and they'll roll their eyes and make some cliched comment about "a heart attack on a plate."

Objectively considered, poutine seems no unhealthier than, say, a cheeseburger with fries, and few think twice about eating that all-American meal.

Whatever health concerns people might have, poutine's inherent deliciousness routinely trumps such quibbles.

Now, poutine is trending.

Want to surf the wave of enthusiasm for this French-Canadian original? Then consider attending Poutine Fest. This first annual celebration of fries-curds-gravy — with multiple variations — will be held Feb.24 at Haymarket Brewery (737 W. Randolph).

Much like Baconfest, Poutine Fest will contribute proceeds to charity, and this competition has attracted some of Chicago's finest and most innovative restaurants, including El Ideas (2419 W. 14th) and Sable Kitchen and Bar (505 N. State).

Like pizza, poutine is a carbohydrate platform that offers opportunities for infinite variation; its culinary potential is only now beginning to be realized in Chicago.

Just as Chicago-style pizza has long been considered one of our city's major contributions to world cuisine, so might Chicago-style poutine someday take its place as one of our regional specialties, along with Italian beef and Vienna hot dogs.

At the moment, we seem to be standing at the dawn of poutine's golden age in Chicago.

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