

## Check, please: New building, same ol' stick

Rick Nelson, Star Tribune

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The big food story at the 2002 Minnesota State Fair technically isn't food. It's a building -- specifically, the Food Building, which is sparkling after an extensive renovation that has brought better traffic flow, cooler air and a host of different, new-to-the-fair choices to the fairground's pig-out central.

But all this modernization comes at a cost. Not only does the building house fewer vendors, but a number of familiar fair faces have disappeared, unable to handle the steep remodeling costs. Still, some oldie-but-goodie favorites are hawking their memorable goodies, from the lingonberry lefse at **Lynn's Potato Lefse** and decadent scones at the **French Meadow Bakery** to the savory mini-kabobs at the **Minnekabob**.

Luckily, some of the 40-plus new fair food entries -- all found in the Food Building unless otherwise noted -- are terrific, starting with the sausages (\*\*\*\* out of four stars, \$4.50) at **My Sausage Sister & Me**. Made by Lorenz Meats in Cannon Falls, from a recipe by sisters Cherie Peterson and Merry Barry, the snappy-skin porketta sausages (blessed with a zingy fennel-thyme-basil bite) are wrapped in a golden-brown dough and stuck on a stick. They're easily the pick of the litter among the fair's new food items, and they deserve a fairgrounds run rivaling that of the Pronto Pup.

Chemical engineers Will Schroeder and T.J. Paskach seem like unlikely ice-cream magnates, until you consider their patent-pending invention, a flash-freeze process that performs miracles with milk. The result, **Nitro Ice Cream** (\*\* 1/2, \$2-\$3), not only includes a wacky mad-scientist kind of show, but the ultra-creamy vanilla ice cream (luscious enough to double as a Victoria's Secret ad campaign) is so irresistible that Schroeder and Paskach have the confidence to serve it plain. Generous portions, too.



T.J. Paskach and Will Schroeder show off their Nitro Ice Cream.

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A few sandwiches are making their Food Building debuts. **Wild Rice Burger** makes -- you got it -- hamburgers fortified with wild rice (\*\*, \$4). It's a quirky made-in-Minnesota idea, and the wild rice gives the burger a nutty quality. **Mario's Pita** is offering an appealing, two-fisted seafood pita (\*\* 1/2, \$6), but loses points for using low-grade scallops, shrimp, crab and lobster. The **Cinnamon Rolls** counter has branched into a few strombolis (\* 1/2, \$3.50-\$5), although they have a definite Hot Pockets vibe. But **That's a Wrap!** does it right, rolling bountiful wraps (\*\*\*, \$5) in tasty combinations such as chicken Caesar and oriental chicken.



The Sausage Sisters, Merry Barry and Cherie Peterson

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It's all Irish at **O'Gara's**, with eye-catching green corn dogs (\*\*, \$2.50-\$3.50) and comfort-foodish corned-beef and cabbage (\*\* 1/2, \$5.75). **Oodles of Noodles** offers three pastas -- penne, cavatappi and



Jillian Blakley of Rochester tried the macaroni-and-cheese-on-a-stick.

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spaghetti -- and three toppings -- marinara, meatballs and butter -- (\*\*, \$3 to \$4.75) and you play mix-and-match. Bland, but good kid food.

They're pouring birch beer (\*\*\*, \$1-\$2) at the **Walleye** stand, and for aficionados it's worth a taste. It's a root beer laced with tree-tapped birch syrup, which gives the soda a lighter, bouncier cast. Apple lovers will get a kick out of the green-apple soda (\*\* 1/2, \$2) at **Granny's Apples**. The chartreuse-colored, ultra-fizzy pop -- bottled by Elder Beverage Co. in St. Cloud -- mimics the taste of Granny Smith apples.

#### Stuck on a stick

Last year's fair food buzz was focused on the deep-fried candy bars on a stick. (Not to worry -- they're back, on Carnes Av. between Underwood St. and Nelson St.) This year's darling is macaroni-and-cheese-on-a-stick (\*\*\*, \$2.50) at **Axel's** (located at the Food Building's southeast outside corner). As novelties go, it's pretty clever, although it's little more than a few pieces of elbow macaroni poked into a silver-dollar-size glob of cheese, deep fried until crispy outside and somewhat molten inside. Like the celebrated cheese curd -- and, frankly, most fair fare -- a little goes a long way.

**Engine House 19** is doing meatballs on a stick (\$3.50, \*\*\*): five golf-ball-size meatballs, brushed with a marinara, chipotle or barbecue sauce (the latter is the tastiest) and stuck on a stick. Why didn't someone think of this no-brainer before? The taste of s'mores is re-created -- on a stick, naturally -- at **Carousel Barbecue** (\*\*\*, \$2.75, Liggett St. between Carnes Av. and Judson Av.), with toasted marshmallows, graham-cracker crumbs and Hershey's chocolate syrup. (Melted Hershey bars would have been a better -- and more authentic -- option.)

Another winner? The bacon-wrapped turkey tenderloin on a stick (\*\*\*, \$5) at the **International Grille** (in the Bazaar). It looks a little like an all-protein Dairy Queen Dilly Bar -- and not in a good way -- but it's an Atkins Diet dream snack.

The folks at **Delicious Potato Skins** had a brilliant idea -- a hoot-on-a-stick, really -- but somewhere it loses its luster. Spudsters (\*, \$2.50) are spoonfuls of deep-fried mashed potatoes. They'd be great if they weren't made with that nasty, fake-tasting butter; it's worse than the second-rate stuff that's on the popcorn at those \$2 bargain multiplexes. Better to go next door for **Falafel King's** golden skin-on potato-wedge fries (\*\* 1/2, \$2).

#### Just like fast food

A few fair newbies take their cues from other celebrity fast foods.

The **Dairy Bar's** "great shakes" (\*\*, \$3.50) -- thick soft-serve ice-cream shakes blended with candy or cookie bits -- bear a striking resemblance to the Dairy Queen Blizzard. Two words -- *Chicken McNuggets* -- encapsulate the popcorn-chicken experience at **Roadhouse Chicken** (\* 1/2, \$3). And Starbucks shouldn't get too worried about the Frappuccino knock-off at **Gepetto's Joe-To-Go** (\* 1/2, \$4, in Wonders of Technology), a spendy and super-sugary drink dubbed the Extreme Coffee Toffee.

Spying the ubiquitous **Leeann Chin** among the fair's mom-and-pop shops is a bit depressing. Still, the fast-fooder plays along, embracing the fair's looney on-a-stick preoccupation with two entries. But don't bother. The lemon chicken on a stick (\*, \$4) is a dull breaded-and-fried boneless breast; you add the gloppy, cornstarchy lemon sauce. And while it sounds amusing, in a how-are-they-going-to-do-that? way, the Szechwan stir-fry on a stick (\*, \$3) is just an egg-roll wrapper stuffed with brown rice, carrots and red peppers, sticked and deep fried. Yawn. But give the dessert wontons (\*\* 1/2, \$3-\$5) a shot. Filled with bananas and white chocolate and drizzled with a caramel sauce, they have a pleasing combination of flavors and textures.

There are two new breakfast sensations. The **Pizza Shoppe** tosses a few morning pizzas (\*\* 1/2, \$3.50), and the results are impressive. Each double-fisted slice -- made with sturdy, chewy crusts -- is topped with scrambled eggs, Canadian bacon, peppers, sausages and other like-minded ingredients. **Tejas Express** (in the Garden) has an awesome new a.m. meal that it dubs Texas Ranch Eggs (\*\* 1/2, \$3), a giant plate of eggs, refried beans, peppers, onions and cheese. Tejas will even throw in a free cup of coffee between 8 and 11 a.m. with any breakfast purchase.

Next door, the **Ragin Cajun** (also in the Garden) has two new foods: blackened catfish (\*\*\*, \$5.75), done either po' boy-style or over rice; get the latter. Skip the Mamie Eisenhower-ish Louisiana sweet grapes (\* 1/2, \$2.25), green grapes in sour cream and brown sugar. Ditto the dreadful buffalo shrimp (\*, \$4.50) and mango chicken (\* 1/2, \$4.50) at **Cafe Caribe** (Carnes Av. at Chambers St.).

Instead, end your fair visit on a high note at **Giggles' Campfire Grill** (in the North Woods). This fine fair-food purveyor has three new tricks up its sleeve. A hefty sandwich starring thinly shaved smoked elk (\*\*, \$5.50) is a little drab, but delicate deep-fried walleye strips (\*\*\*, \$5.75) are superb. A dessert of ice cream, lemon sponge cake and blueberries (\*\*\*, \$3.75) exudes clean, fresh flavors.

And kudos to Axel's for its juicy grilled sirloin tips with a snappy horseradish sauce (\*\*\*, \$5) and bite-size jerk pork (\*\*\* 1/2, \$5), with a cool mango salsa. They're so delicious they don't even need to be on a stick.

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#### **WHAT THE STARS MEAN**

\*\*\*\* **Exceptional**

\*\*\* **Highly recommended**

\*\* **Recommended**

\* **Satisfactory**