

Woman bites dog - finds it delicious

By Esther Baird

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OK all you organic foodies and health nuts, this column is not for you.

Look, I try to create a balanced diet for my family. I use seasonal veggies and fruits, and I strive for multi-colored dishes to represent the inclusion of antioxidants or folic acid or lycopene or whatever the popular nutrient du jour is. But there is one food item that we're just not giving up. In our house we eat, and we love, hot dogs. We want to lick our nitrate-soaked, shiny, happy fingers whenever we eat them.

We like them boiled, grilled, sliced into mac-n-cheese, butterflyed in a burger bun, heaped with toppings, in a vat of baked beans, or wrapped in corn meal and stuck on a stick. We don't care what they are made of. We are only happy that they have, in fact, been made.

So you can imagine how excited I was to see Rondogs opening on the corner of Rantoul and Elliot. We lived in Chicago for many years where the neighborhood hot-dog stand is a given. Everyone goes to them, and everyone knows that they should have bright lights that draw bugs late at night, music crackling out of mounted speakers, and just enough space to do what they do best: Whip up hot dogs.

Rondogs looked like just such a stand. The name was perfect. Obviously there was a guy named Ron. He loved hot dogs. And he hoped we did too. What else did we need to know? There was no need to be fancy about it. Hot dogs stand on their own without any bells and whistles. My daughters and I — well my oldest daughter and I — couldn't wait to visit.

So last week on a bright sunny day, I tucked the girls into the double stroller and we headed down for a visit. Upon arrival, we availed ourselves of one the freshly painted picnic tables complete with shade umbrellas, and I went up to place my order. But a server, wearing a cute Rondogs T-shirt, walked over and said, "Oh I'll bring everything out, you just sit down." With two wiggling children, I didn't need to be told twice that I wouldn't have to juggle hot dogs and drinks on my own.

She brought out the menu and I instantly knew that I'd found a keeper. Ron gets hotdogs. The choices are varied, yet never ridiculous. There are a few different sizes and ways to get your hot dog and then a whole bunch of toppings. Additionally, if you are feeling indecisive, there are a handful of specialty dogs that have pre-chosen toppings — each named after a Rondog family member I was told. The menu is classic and moderately priced. Best of all, they sell a quarter-pound hot dog.

“It’s the juiciest dog we sell,” the server informed me.

“Well, obviously I’ll have that one,” I said, since I firmly believe the bigger the better when it comes to hot dogs. I chose a few toppings and proceeded to order my older daughter a Regular Rondog — since I’ll concede that she’s not *quite* old enough to tackle a quarter pound of hot dog greatness. Finally, for my 1- year-old, I was pleased to see the list of side dishes included a Whole Pickle — one of her favorite, blessedly time-consuming, foods to gnaw on.

The hot dogs were fantastic. They were juicy as promised and the toppings were generous. But it got even better. As we sat at our table and happily ate our dogs, I realized another bit of fabulousness was unfolding before my eyes.

Cars were pulling up into the newly painted parking lot, but the owners were not getting out. Because, and this is almost too good to be true, the Rondog servers are actually carhops! They walked to the cars, took the orders, and then like magic, like the most convenient favorite food producing trick of all time, they brought the meals back out to the cars where the owners sat in sunny bliss.

First a drive-through Starbucks and now a carhop hot dog stand? Be still my beating heart Beverly, I may never grocery shop again. Or at the very least, on those days when I can’t summon up the energy to pull together my healthful, seasonally correct, colorful dinner, I’ll know I can mosey on down to Rondogs. With the proper topping choices I can guarantee the inclusion of spiciness, cheesiness, and chili yumminess — a perfect balance of flavors that trendy nutrients simply can’t beat.

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