

# Eyes on the FRIES

Beloved fries and tots are taking another turn in the limelight, this time nestling under flavorful sauces and bold toppings

BY ITS VERY NATURE, street food is edgy, hip, ephemeral. For restaurants to imitate the experience can be like a businessman wearing a motorcycle jacket — the effort seems contrived. But some dishes translate beautifully onto brick-and-mortar menus. Gaining rock-star status from street food, these casual-yet-bold dishes include such items as hot dogs, tacos and loaded fries. These flavor-loaded-and-layered fries hold great potential for accurate translation from street to restaurant. Fries are safe, familiar and delicious. Add wonderful, savory ingredients and move them from a standard side dish to craveable shareables, late-night snacks, bar-menu favorites. You can even grant them entrée status.

Street-food vendors, hawking mash-ups like fries topped with Korean barbecue beef, kimchi, green onions and Japanese sweet mayonnaise (Koja Kitchen, Los Angeles), have opened the flood gates of exploration here.

“There is an opportunity here for operators to create a destination menu item or LTO that has inherent mass appeal, is rooted in comfort and can be delivered at an affordable price point,” says chef Rob Corliss of ATE/All

Things Epicurean. “Customers will be willing to venture out with their tastebuds for the price of a fun dish.”

It’s important, though, to play to your audience. “The street-food crowd is more experimental,” says Culinary Tides’ Suzy Badaracco. “Follow the continuum of the trend and ride the tightrope between non-threatening and adventurous. Don’t give me insects. Give me poutine, or Asian-inspired loaded fries. Go global comfort food.”

The common element in the growing iterations of loaded fries is the simple potato — a comparatively inexpensive tether to a dish. Whether it is Bacon & Egg Fries served at two-unit Sauce in San Francisco (deviled egg, crispy bacon, portobello, ranch dressing) or Umami Fries at Los Angeles-based Umami Burger (tomato, porcini, miso, herbs), at its core, it’s the potato.

“For operators, potatoes are an inexpensive blank canvas,” says Darren Tristano at Technomic. “For diners, loaded

fries are usually cheap and filling.” Combine a low-cost platform with a shoo-in for popularity and craveability, and loaded fries might just present the most profitable trend opportunity for foodservice operators this year.

“  
Fries are the perfect platform for on-trend flavors and savory indulgence. Fries as a base bring several attributes: cost effectiveness, flavor, comfort, texture and bulk.”

”  
CHARLIE BAGGS

Poutine is elevated at The Coterie Room in Seattle, with braised pork shoulder gravy, fried Beecher's cheese curds and sprigs of fresh parsley — all atop thick-cut rosemary-seasoned fries.



ERNIE SAPIRO PHOTOGRAPHY

**Why Now** Fries have evolved and have gone the way of the burger, the taco and the hot dog. This has allowed fries to become a platform rather than a side on the plate. Be sure to use a really great fry as the base for really great toppings.

– MINDY ARMSTRONG

### FUELING LOADED FRIES

Look beyond our borders — both near and far — for today’s biggest influencers of the loaded fries trend. First, pay attention to poutine, the savory, addictive combination of fries, cheese curds and gravy that has been Quebec’s biggest domestic food export since the 1950s. Smoke’s Pouterie, based in Ajax, Ontario, is soon pushing across the border, first infiltrating Portland, Seattle, Los Angeles, Chicago and Miami. This Canadian multi-unit started with one small footprint in Toronto in 2008, catering mostly to late-night crowds with its 30-plus variations of poutine. Now? Smoke’s Pouterie has exploded, boasting 40 units across Canada. “We created a whole new industry,” says Ryan Smolkin, founder and CPO (chief poutine officer).

Poutine has always been treated as a snack or side dish. Smolkin elevated it to a main meal by adding hearty protein-heavy toppings. At its base are hand-cut fresh fries, Montreal cheese curds and housemade brown gravy. Hits include: Double Pork Poutine, which adds chipotle pulled pork, double-smoked bacon and peppercorn gravy to the poutine base; and Philly Cheese Steak, with shaved roast beef, cheese sauce, roasted red peppers, sautéed mushrooms and caramelized onions.

Smoke’s core demographic is the 18 to 25 age group in downtown urban areas. “When we first opened, we were going after the late-night crowd,” says Smolkin. But the revelation as the chain grows? Half of its business comes from lunch and dinner sales. “We’re giving consumers a meal option that’s fun, affordable and a little bit out of the everyday,” he says. “We’re selling an experience; it’s not just about fries, cheese curds and gravy.” Part of that experience is the interactive nature of poutine — and loaded fries of all stripes.

The key to poutine here in the U.S. is highlighting the cheese curds, making signature its rich brown gravy and customizing its build-outs. “I think poutine is going to be more commonplace,” says Ryan Bleibtrey, executive chef at The Original, a “dinerant” in Portland, Ore. “Once

“Gastro pubs and other innovative establishments that serve food and drink together are serving loaded fries that are decadent and delicious, but not necessarily the standard fare of chili with onions and melted cheddar. Instead, look for combinations of sweet potato and russet fries tossed with shredded rotisserie chicken and a garlic-rosemary-olive oil drizzle with buttery, lemon-scented panko breadcrumbs. It’s loaded with flavor, but not necessarily the ‘gut bust’ of yesterday.”

ANDREW HUNTER



CALIFORNIA MILK ADVISORY BOARD

Craveable flavors join force in these Cheesy California Buffalo Fries, seasoned with cayenne and mesquite and topped with melted Jack cheese and blue cheese dressing and crumbles.

our guests try it, they love it. Our servers just have to explain them and then they're hard to resist."

At The Original, diners can order straightforward poutine, or perhaps the Trainwreck, which loads chili and cheese fondue onto the fries, too. Bleibtrey starts with frozen fries, deep-fries them and tops them with local cheddar cheese curds. He then smothers the fries and curds with a housemade brown gravy (veal jus reduction, béchamel, sage, rosemary, caramelized garlic, black pepper). For the Trainwreck, he adds an Italian-style chili (beef, pork, mirepoix, tomato, winter herbs) and cheese fondue (Tillamook cheddar, PVR beer, cream, béchamel). He offers both dishes as shareable appetizers and as upgrades to burger orders. He can go through up to five pounds of poutine in under 30 minutes. Once a poutine offering is part of the line-up, variations — and cross-utilization opportunities — abound. Bleibtrey features poutine crowned with a poached egg on his brunch menu. And occasionally he'll run a Cobb Poutine, starring poutine, blue cheese and bacon.

“To execute this is as simple as looking at your current menu and utilizing current SKUs on your menu. Turning a typical side into an extraordinary shareable appetizer is easy with loaded potatoes. This could be as simple as tater tots with crispy pancetta and grated Locatelli cheese, or sweet potato fries with a variety of seasonings and toppings. Just these few touches mean profit. Try a weekly menu for loaded fries and watch your customers come back for their favorite.”

RICK PEREZ

## ON THE MENU

## Loaded Fries

**POUTINE TOTS** ~ Golden tots covered with all-natural cheddar cheese curds and smothered with beef gravy  
TOT BOSS, ST. PAUL, MINN.

**ÉTOUFFÉE FRIES** ~ Spicy Cajun roux, lime, cilantro, smothered over house fries  
CHAPTER ONE MODERN LOCAL, SANTA ANA, CALIF.

**CHICKEN SWEET-POTATO FRIES** ~ Free-range chicken in tomatillo-tamarind sauce over sweet potato fries topped with cashews  
FRYSMITH, LOS ANGELES

**KIMCHI FRIES** ~ Topped with kimchi, pork belly, cheese, sour cream  
DEL SEOUL KOREAN STREET BBQ, CHICAGO

“The longtime consumer appreciation and craveability of fries continues to drive delight in the exploration of new flavors and toppings. Fries are a year-round menu mainstream and thus take well to seasonal upgrades. Loaded fries are the next extension from seasoned fries. People love to customize their food, especially with favorites such as fries. Offer high-quality and one-of-a-kind flavor cues for guests to add to their beloved fries.”

ROB CORLISS

At Frysmith, an iconic loaded-fries food truck in Los Angeles, poutine takes on an American regional posture with the “New-tine,” fries topped with peppery bacon, Southern Comfort gravy, pecans and Ballard Family Farms cheddar cheese curds.

#### EMBOLDENED BUILDS

The interactive experience of fries loaded with the ideal proportions of creative, adventurous toppings endears them to diners, especially Millennials keen on customizing their bites. “Toppings add savory umami notes and play on the craveable salty-sweet flavor profile — both things institutionalized with ketchup,” says Kara Nielsen, CCD Innovation trendologist.

Use of bold flavors and intriguing global influences propel the trend further. As evidence, check out Austin food truck Chi’Lantro’s Caramelized Kimchi Fries, a mound of sizzling Korean BBQ, grilled onions, cheddar and Monterey Jack cheese, cilantro, “magic” sauce, sriracha and sesame seeds. Or the loaded tots with a Korean spin at Sakaya Kitchen in Miami that stars “chunk’d” spicy cheesy kalbi beef.

Another twist on the trend is to look to other bases for loaded fries. Indeed, tots seem to be a standout potato form here, where chefs are casting aside the fry for the one-bite, nostalgic perfection that is the tater tot. At True North Tavern in San Diego, tater tots are topped with warm cheese sauce, cilantro, chipotle cream, salsa fresca and a choice of carne asada, chicken and bacon, shredded barbecue pork or chili.

“Fries make a great base, but tater tots add an element of fun,” says chef Kathy Casey. “Topped with caramelized onions, red-wine gravy, sharp cheese sauce, local cheese curds and house-pickled hot peppers, this favorite gets new life as a loaded menu option.”

The ever-popular sweet potato is another ideal base for loaded builds. Another Los Angeles truck, Fresh Fries, tops theirs with hummus, smoked paprika and sesame seeds. And for a decadent dessert version, Fresh Fries loads Nutella and peanut butter atop sweet potato fries.

**RESPECT THE POTATO**

“Regardless of what ends up on top, it’s important not to forget that the fry itself is the star,” says The Culinary Edge’s Steven Goldstein. “Keep them crispy and feel free to play with different forms, like tots, and different cuts, like shoestring and steak fries.”

Smoke’s Smolkin agrees, saying the french fry is the foundation of his brand. “My product is my fries,” he says. “They have to be premium.” His burgeoning chain features hand-cut yellow-fleshed potatoes. Skin on, they’re soaked in water to get rid of some of the starch, rinsed, drained and run through a hand-cranked cutter. The fries are then blanched and cooled, then cooked to

# POTATOES with Big Potential

BY GERRY LUDWIG

When I first tasted carne asada fries, an irresistible loaded fries dish peculiar to the Los Angeles area, I could not understand why it is not served nationwide. The fries are topped with crunchy cubes of grilled skirt steak, guajillo chile sauce, melted white cheese, avocado, sour cream and jalapeños. This is a dish that consumers would immediately understand, making it ideal for casual restaurant and bar menus.

Fried smashed potatoes is another variation with potential for menu differentiation. They are made by boiling red or white B-size potatoes until tender and then gently smashing them to break the skin and expose some of the flesh. The potatoes are then deep fried to yield an extremely crisp and crunchy potato. They are the signature house fry at Los Angeles burger joint Short Order, served with a creamy horseradish and bacon dip. At Chicago’s Osteria Via Stato, the fried potatoes are tossed with olive oil, roasted garlic and chopped fresh rosemary. And at The Purple Pig in Chicago, they serve as the base for a dish of griddled chicken thigh kebabs drizzled with tzatziki sauce.



  
THE DISH THAT BECAME  
A DESTINATION.

**MINOR'S**  
Natural Gluten Free Bases  
provide the finest flavors  
from natural ingredients—  
tested gluten free—with  
25% less sodium! So you  
can serve the tastes they've  
been looking for and develop  
the loyalty you desire.  
Call 1-800-243-8922 or visit  
[flavormeansbusiness.com](http://flavormeansbusiness.com)

 **MINOR'S**  
TRUSTED BY CHEFS

© 2013 Minor's. All rights reserved. Photo: Greg Gahan

**How to Work It** There have been innovations in fry forms and actual potatoes (Kennebec, sweet potato, style of cuts, etc.); now it is time to push the envelope with easy-to-execute flavor experiences and toppers. Look at your existing fries, chips or even breakfast hash browns along with utilizing existing menu ingredients in a new way or combination for craveable guest appeal.

– ROB CORLISS



FRYSMITH

As evidence of fries' culinary range, Frysmith tested a build of sweet potato fries with chicken liver, prosciutto and Parmesan.

“Elaborated starchy foundations — spicy frites, cheesy chips, topped tots, protein-enriched poutine, saucy rösti, heirloom hashes — have a place at the table, the counter, the street or the bar. A less-expensive, rib-sticking base with protein as flavor just makes sense!”

ROBIN SCHEMPP

order. “To keep our order times low, we have to do it this way,” he says. Indeed, during the three rush periods, a single unit with two registers will serve more than 180 servings of made-to-order poutine in one hour. That’s one order every 20 seconds!

Similar to Five Guys, Smoke’s showcases its potatoes in each restaurant. “This was borne out of necessity,” says Smolkin. In early days, the storefronts were so small that there was no extra storage space, so he would stack the potatoes out front. “Now, it’s part of our brand, showcasing our premium potatoes.” Smoke’s runs an operating cost of a small chain because at its core is a simple build stemming from an inexpensive commodity — the potato. Units now pull in an average of \$1 million-plus in annual revenues. “We started small and we won’t stop until we have global domination,” he says with a smile. “Loaded fries, if done right, are a gravy train. Get on board!” ☺