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Windy City Red Hots in Ashburn

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It's often said that home is where the heart is. In some cases, home is also where the food is. For Chicago-to-Leesburg transplant Angel Miranda, the latter was certainly true.

Miranda and his wife, Pia, moved to Northern Virginia in 1998. The transition was tough at first, but eventually they grew to appreciate their new town's tranquillity (becoming parents will do that to a couple). They found one problem with Leesburg, however: the food. None of it appealed to their

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Chicago-bred palates, and efforts to find a taste of home proved futile.

"It was a bit of a shock," says Miranda, who hated that he couldn't get a properly prepared hot dog in his new environs. And if he asked someone for Italian beef, the response was universal: "What?"

After 10 years during which Miranda worked in restaurants and at a corporate job, he saw an opportunity. He could fill the void, he thought. So with his family's help, he did just that. He quit his nine-to-five and started scouting out a location to park Windy City Red Hots, a trailer-truck takeout that would soon sell his hometown street foods in Northern Virginia. Remembering that he had occasionally seen food trucks in the lot at Blue Mount Nursery in nearby Ashburn, he asked the owners whether he could hawk his fare there. He got the green light and got to work.

Now, just over a year since it opened, Windy City Red Hots is alive and well, attracting local and farflung customers with its menu of classic eats, all imported from Chicago: red-hots (\$2.93), Maxwell Street polish sausages (\$3.75), Italian beef sandwiches (\$7.75), Italian sausages (\$3.75) and the lesserknown, deep-fried pizza puff (\$3.75), a flour tortilla stuffed with mozzarella cheese, Italian sausage, pizza sauce and spices.

Do not miss the sensational dogs, dressed traditionally with green relish, tomato, onion, sport peppers (small pickled peppers), celery salt and a pickle spear, and served on wonderfully squishy and addictive steamed poppy seed buns. Most additional toppings are free; cheddar cheese sauce, sweet peppers, chili and grilled onions cost 35 cents extra.

Sausages provide the essential snap. Ask for your Italian beef "wet," as we did, and you'll be rewarded with a roll soaked in beef juice, barely containing the huge pile of lean meat within; it's drippingly delicious. Chili cheese fries (\$3.75) are generously portioned, the fresh potatoes lurking underneath a somewhat greasy hood.

Mustard is king here, but if asked, Miranda will provide ketchup. Just don't expect him to approve. This might look like Ashburn, but it definitely tastes like Chicago.

-- Catherine Barker

Windy City Red Hots 19413 Smith Cir., Ashburn; 703-505-6934, http://www.windycityredhots.com. Hours: Tuesdays through Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Sundays, noon to 4 p.m.

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