HOT DOGS: CHICAGO STYLE

Iconic Chicago chef Doug Sohn on building his cult restaurant and the perfect dog

New York vs. Chicago
Which dog is hotter?

Debunking the dog
What’s inside?

Tofu revolution
The hot dog’s evil brother gets a makeover

THE DOG DAYS OF SUMMER


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A reporter e-mailed me recently and asked what criteria to use in judging the best hot dog in his hometown. I chuckled because after 20 years in the business, I’m continually amazed by the passion that the “who makes the best hot dog?” question can stir.

For Chicagoans, the answer is easy. It’s the hometown dog. It’s my hometown, too, which gives me a special appreciation for the gastronomical feast we call a Chicago dog. An all beef hot dog. A steamed poppy seed bun. Mustard. Onions. Sliced tomatoes. Green (make that extra green) relish. Sport peppers. A dill pickle spear. And celery salt. It just doesn’t get any better than this.

The meat of memories
Why do Chicagoans (and New Yorkers, and Atlantans and folks from Kansas City and elsewhere) feel so strongly about their dogs? Because hot dogs are so strongly associated with memories. They are the stuff of memories. What are ours? Wrigley Field. Sox Park. Da Bears games. Vendors shouting “Hot Dogs, Get your hot dogs” with an endearing Chicago accent. Lakefront picnics. Trips to the zoo. Bluesfest. A little league game on a Spring evening. Our backyard grills sizzling on a Sunday with family gathered. I grew up here in the days when we walked home from school for lunch. Mom welcomed me with hot dogs simmering and Bozo’s Circus playing. I’d clutch that dog, hoping against hope that Ringmaster Ned would pull my name from his magic drum and I could play the Grand Prize Game from home. It was a distinctly Chicago experience.

Times like these fix our feelings about food so that they run deep. There’s no question that hot dogs run deep in the American soul. Americans consume an estimated 20 billion hot dogs per year. They are the top baseball food consumed in all major league ball parks except Milwaukee, where Cousin Sausage wins. Even in the face of competition from new ballpark foods Americans are loyal to their dogs.

More than just a food
Hot dogs are part of our vocabulary, our movies and our music. “Hot dog!” is what we shout when we’re happy, which we usually are with one in our hand. And when Perry Como croons “Hot diggity, dog ziggity, boom what you do to me,” you know the hot dog is more than a just a food.

Hot dogs are also emblematic of the Chicago immigrant experience. Like so many of us, the hot dog is an European import, brought by Germans and Austrians. Chicagoans put a local twist on the dog when hard times hit during the depression, vendors added more toppings to the dogs to attract more buyers and the top-heavy wiener became the Windy City’s signature food.

Times are changing. Cuisine is changing. But Chicago holds its hot dogs dear. When born and bred Chicagoans like me return and see the colorful images of Chicago dogs along the streets, no words are needed. That image says “Welcome Home.” Happy Hot Dog Month, Chicago. I raise a frank in tribute to you.
Oscar Mayer Selects are made with 100% pure Angus beef and have no artificial preservatives. It’s the big beefy taste everyone cheers for.
Question: How did Hot Doug’s come to be known for some of the best Chicago style hot dogs and some of the best, most innovative options ever to grace a hot dog stand menu?
Answer: By tasting Chicago style hot dogs at more than 40 local establishments, Doug Sohn knew exactly what to offer when he opened Hot Doug’s.

Doug Sohn and his journey to the perfect dog

HOW I MADE IT

After graduating from culinary school, Doug Sohn was working as a cookbook editor and trying to figure out his next step. He and several coworkers, spurred on by a bad hot dog eating experience, set out to try as many different hot dog establishments as possible to discern who did the best dog.

After noticing himself so often saying, “I like what this place does, I think this could work but needs to be tweaked,” Sohn decided to open his own Chicago style hot dog stand. Sohn opened Hot Doug’s at a location in the Roscoe Village neighborhood of Chicago, and business quickly took off.

A fire and a new location
The original Hot Doug’s location in Roscoe Village suffered a fire by way of a freak accident in the building. For a long time, Doug was not sure he would reopen. “At first, it was like ‘Oh great, we’re done, let’s go do something else’,” Sohn jokes. “But then I received so many phone calls and emails, it was really humbling and eye opening to see how much people appreciated our restaurant.”

He reopened the now-classic Encased Meats Emporium in Avondale, and was once again hard at work selling his wares. These range in diversity from a Chicago style hot dog to a smoked crayfish sausage and pork sausage with shrimp remoulade and caraway havarti cheese.

Sohn has been lauded by numerous publications and television shows for helping to bring affordable gourmet fast food to the people of Chicago. He strives to keep flocks of the faithful as well as new customers interested, and continues to explore his culinary range. “At the end of the day, to me it has always been all about being sure to deliver the best Chicago style hot dog.”

Toppings? Yes, please!
Sohn believes that, “Food is so subjective that any taste you like, will work on a hot dog. It really is the quintessential American food for customization.”

Try a Gramp’s Gourmet Jalapeno-Garlic Sour Dill Pickle on your favorite Chicago Hot Dog!

It is our goal to create unique handcrafted foods that create memories of family, fun and simpler times.

We make a wide variety of both sour dill and sweet pickles in garlic, jalapeno, horseradish and habanero flavors.

Hot Dogs Across America

The perfect dog
Doug’s classic Chicago Style dog served up in its hometown.
PHOTO: ROYA JADE

INSPIRATION

Italian Style (New Jersey)
Skinny all beef hot dogs deep fried and stuffed into a half-round of Italian bread along with fried onion, peppers and potato rounds.

New York City
Steamed onions and a pale, deli-style yellow mustard.

Dodger Dog (Los Angeles)
One of the most eaten stadium dogs out there. Dodger dogs are skinless foot-long hot dogs made of pork and set in a steamed bun. Dodger fans can get theirs steamed or grilled and if they can’t make it to the park, the official Farmer John Dodger Dogs can be found in some supermarkets in the area.

Kansas City
Sauerkraut and melted Swiss cheese on a sesame seed bun.

Chicago Dog
The possible antithesis to New York dogs, Chicago dogs are layered with yellow mustard, dark green relish, sport peppers, chopped raw onion, tomato slices, topped with a dash of celery salt and served in a poppy seed bun.

Coney Dogs (Detroit and Midwest)
Small-sized, all-beef natural casing dogs served in steamed buns and topped with minced meat chili, mustard, and chopped onions (order the “loaded” and you’ll get shredded cheddar, too).

Drug Through the Garden (Atlanta and the South)
Topped with coleslaw.
FOOD BLISS

What better way to absorb Chicago’s history than by ingesting the city’s most iconic street food, the hot dog? Whether the subject is Chicago’s historic economy, its ethnic history, its culture, all are tied to the hot dog.

Chicago was meat central when hot dogs appeared on the scene, as in Carl Sandburg’s famous phrase, “Hog butcher for the world, Tool maker, Stacker of wheat....” From nineteenth into the twentieth centuries, the city’s Union Stockyards processed a huge percentage of America’s meat and wheat. While the well-to-do gorged on expensive steaks, working class people ate cheaper meat, literally, hot dogs.

Chicago’s preferred dog. If Jews created hot dogs, Greeks, Macedonians, Bulgarians, Italians, and Mexicans dressed them.

In Chicago of 1900-1920s, Greek and Italian competed in the fruit and vegetable market, and a good number of them were street vendors. Both invented many of the toppings on the Chicago hot dog, the classic “garden on a bun.” Green relish (Piccalilli-the first mention is at a Cubs-Sox exhibition game of 1928), sport peppers (pickled mildly hot small chilies), and tomato are Mediterranean in origin, like a giardiniere. Mustard is German-Jewish, as are the pickle spears and, optionally celery salt (this replaces a once ubiquitous vegetable on the American table). The ensemble gives a sweet-sour-spicy flavor profile that was dear to East European and Mediterranean taste buds. The Chicago hot dog is a literal palimpsest of early twentieth century Chicago ethnicity.

Evolution of the stand
The style became popular during the Great Depression of the 1930s and especially after World War II when many of Chicago’s stands were established. Classic stands where hot dog styles range from older, more plainly dressed dogs, to fully loaded ones are scattered through the city and suburbs. Jimmy’s on Grand Avenue and Gene and Jude’s on River Road are among the former, while Murphy’s on Belmont Ave is a classic of the latter. And we cannot forget the original Maxwell Street Polish, introduced at Jim’s Original and the Express Grill on Union Street (close to their original sites) with great grilled onions.

To these typical styles, new “upscale” versions have appeared. The leader is Doug Sohn’s Hot Doug’s on North California Ave. The “encased meats emporium” serves sausages made from venison, crayfish and other interesting ingredients with many toppings more familiar on fine dining menus. More recently, Haute Dogs on Clybourn Ave and Chicago’s Dog House on Fullerton street have joined the fine dining hot dog crowd. That the traditional street food hot dog has been transformed shows what has happened to a city that is more a business center than a gritty industrial powerhouse.

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A brief history of hot dogs in Chicago
Ah, the veggie dog. The hot dog’s evil brother, shunned sausage of the barbecue and a sad option for vegetarians and animal empathsizers alike. Or is it?

No longer a gray mass of tofu, today’s veggie dog has been dressed up with toppings like mango chutney and vegan chili, options like corn dogs and Italian sausage, and health benefits that will have you reaching for seconds.

They’re healthy
Opting for the vegetarian version of your favorite brat could cut your calorie intake in half. A regular Italian pork sausage can pack up to 300 calories per link, with 200 of those calories from fat! Smart Sausages vegetarian option is only 140 calories per link, with 70 calories from fat.

Craving a classic, ballpark-inspired frank instead? Tofurky’s original dogs will set you back only 80 calories per serving, leaving plenty of room for seconds… or thirds.

They’re environmentally friendly
Not only are Tofurky’s veggie dogs low in calories and saturated fat, but they’re good for the planet. Turtle Island Foods only uses soy that has been extracted from a natural pressing technique, eliminating the use of the toxic air contaminant, hexane.

They’re fancy
If you’re really feeling adventurous, make a trip out to Puka Dog on the island of Kauai. They’ve been dressing up their veggie dogs with toppings like mango relish and fresh banana for the past 10 years. But you don’t have to go that far for a little variety. Try a Morning Star veggie corn dog, or top off a regular dog with a can of their vegan chili.

Their history is debatable
While vegetarian sausages have been around since the early 20th century, Worthington Foods claims to have introduced the veggie hot dog in 1949. Their origin may be undecided, but their destination is certain: Into the hands and stomachs of millions of health-conscious Americans.

Debunking the dog: The USDA has specific rules

People often ask if other parts of meat are used in hot dogs and here’s the answer.

“In order to be a hot dog, you must start with meat or poultry. It’s part of the hot dog’s “standard of identity.” Variety meats like hearts or livers are technically permitted under the rules, but if they are used, hot dogs must then be called “Hot dogs with variety meats” and on the ingredient statement, the package must indicate which variety meat was used.

I look at the hot dog case all the time and it’s nearly impossible to find hot dogs with variety meats anymore. Variety meats are perfectly wholesome, but they just aren’t commonly consumed by Americans, so hot dog makers don’t commonly make hot dogs with variety meats.

We add ice chips, seasonings like salt, pepper, cumin, paprika, garlic and curing ingredients like sodium nitrite that give hot dogs a distinct flavor and color and also help ensure their safety.

**Savor the Flavor**
America’s Top Selling Meatless Sausages and Dogs
As we celebrate National Hot Dog Month this July, thousands of young fans will make an American rite of passage and attend their first ball game.

Baseball and hot dogs: An American tradition

Along with souvenir gloves and foam fingers, into their eager young hands will go a piece of the 22,435,400 hot dogs that are expected to sell in Major League Baseballs parks across the country.

Even with expanding ballpark menus that include everything from funnel cakes, to nachos and wings, the hot dog remains king. You can’t think of baseball without thinking of hot dogs, and you can’t think of hot dogs without automatically thinking of baseball. It’s a combination Americans have been enjoying since the 1890’s, and it’s easy to see why. The low cost and easy handling of hot dogs make them the perfect snack for a crowded venue. Whether you’re reaching for a foul ball, or holding on to a cold drink, a hot dog won’t get in your way. They’re our constant ballpark companion. Consistently the same, while at the same time constantly evolving. Once sold out of a simple push cart and offered up without a bun, today’s dogs come in jumbo and foot long sizes, with chili and cheese toppings, and (in Cincinnati) wrapped in bacon and deep fried. They’re served wrapped in foil, and tossed from vendors in the stands. They’ve been brought to life as mascots, and raced against sausages in the 6th inning at Miller Park. But while the outward appearance of hot dogs may have changed, the sentiment and tradition remains the same.

As hot dogs remain a fixture in American ballparks, so do the experiences that go with them: That first game, the opening pitch, and a summertime tradition that’s been passed on for generations.

Serving great sides to complement a dog

Millions of hot dogs are consumed each year in the U.S.—and the side options are just as numerous.

Think about a typical summer cookout; the most important food is there, the hot dog, but which sides are available and which ones will best compliment the deliciously grilled hot dogs? While there are numerous options, there are a few stars that jump to the forefront including appetizing baked beans, potato and pasta salads, and even the occasional macaroni and cheese.

Baked beans have long been the go to side dish at summer hot dog cookouts, so much so that Bush’s Baked Beans now produces varieties known specifically as “Grillin Beans”. Some people even go so far as to put the baked beans directly on their dog as an additional topping.

Those that prefer to go with something on the cool side often opt for potato or pasta salad, however once in the realm of these salads, there are quite separate factions as to how to prepare and most importantly dress these salads. The debate ranges from mayonnaise based dressings to mustard based dressings to store bought versus homemade. In fact, the debates over how to come up with your potato or pasta salad might almost be as virulent as the debate over which side is best with the hot dog!

While there are too many options to mention, macaroni and cheese definitely has its place in the summer cookout side dish conversation. It is in many ways a great and delicious offering with nearly any meal throughout the year, as its versatility and likability across all age groups helps it avoid the leftover containers at the end of the evening. Whichever side dish is preferred at summer cookouts this summer, it can be almost guaranteed that any summer cookout is guaranteeing a delicious spread and good times with friends and family.
Bush’s® Baked Beans and hot dogs.
Grill friends forever.
As curator of the National Mustard Museum, I am, of course, completely unbiased on this subject. But seriously, would you even consider adorning a classic Chicago dog with any other condiment? There is the question of that unfortunate crimson substance. Dirty Harry, in Sudden Impact, said it best: “Nobody puts ketchup on a hot dog.” While twelve-year-old boys and other similarly deranged individuals may desecrate their dogs with that wretched red substance, civilized humans know that only mustard can bring out the full flavor of a proper tube steak.

The condiment of choice for a fine frankfurter is mustard, the golden sauce that provides both a pleasing eyeful and a tangy mouthful of pleasure. As you sit down for the first pitch, hoist your wiener to the sky and revel in the sparkle of yellow against the backdrop of blue sky, green grass, and dusty brown infield. Heaven!

Here at the Mustard Museum we serve hot dog and bratwurst sliders. You can have any condiment you want. So long as it’s mustard. With more than 400 different mustards to choose from, that’s never a problem.

The National Mustard Museum in Middleton, Wisconsin, is open daily from 10 to 5. By city ordinance, ketchup is not allowed within three hundred yards of the building. 800-438-6878; mustardmuseum.com.
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