



America's Best Hot Dogs

Who's top dog? Our writer ventures a claim for 10 places you have to try.

By Bret Stetka for MSN Local Edition



Bark Hot Dogs in Brooklyn -- New York's finest?

The hot dog is a complicated sausage. Not so much in flavor, but in origin.

The Viennese claim credit, hence the now snicker-worthy nickname "wieners" -- taken from Vienna's name in German, *Wien*. Frankfurt's not buying it, and instead traces the hot dog back to its own frankfurter wurst, supposedly invented in the 1480s. Still other accounts attribute the ancient sausage to Johann Georghehner, a 17th-century Bavarian butcher who deemed his creation the dachshund, or badger dog.

Wherever it came from, the dog eventually crossed the Atlantic and in the mid-to-late 1800s began popping up in cities like Chicago and New York. In 1867, a German butcher named Charles Feltman set up a hot dog stand in Coney Island, Brooklyn, later inspiring his employee, Nathan Handwerker, to found his own doggerie, Nathan's Famous. Now the best known dog shop in the country, Nathan's still intrigues and disgusts us every year with its July 4th Hot Dog Eating Contest.

By the early 1900s the wiener craze had extended well beyond Coney, as the hot dog followed sausage-loving European immigrants all over the country. To honor the narrowest of iconic American foods, I've profiled 10 great hot dog shops around the country worth an immediate road trip.

Asia Dog - Brooklyn, N.Y. (Brooklyn Flea)

Asia Dog updates N.Y.C.'s foremost street food with a fresh, flavorful trek through a pan-Asian market. Choose from beef, organic beef, chicken, or vegetarian dogs; they're all good, but it's really about the toppings. The "Ito" picks up fiery bite from Japanese curry and apple kimchi while the bright and crunchy "Sidney" sits beneath mango relish and crushed peanuts. Meatheads opt for the rich and decadent "Wangding" -- why not top an already meaty hot dog with Chinese barbecue pork belly?

The menu's finest cultural mash-up is the "Vinh," a banh mi-style dog. Banh mi are a type of Vietnamese sandwich, and like the baguette-bound standard, Asia Dog's interpretation comes topped with pork pate, cucumbers, pickled carrot and daikon, and cilantro: a fresh and crunchy taunt at mustard and ketchup that will have you dropping \$3 on another. And another. And so on... Look for Asia Dog on the weekends at the [Brooklyn Flea](#), a trendy flea market packed with tight jeans and delicious food.

> Search for more on [Asia Dog](#)



Bark Hot Dogs: Pricier than some, but worth it.

Bark Hot Dogs - Brooklyn, N.Y. (464 Bergen St., Park Slope)

Hot dogs are a humble food and really shouldn't cost \$6. But I'll make an exception for a Bark dog, New York's finest artisan wiener.

Chefs and owners Josh Sharkey and Brandon Gillis source their dogs -- a blend of beef and pork -- from Hartmann's Old World Sausage in upstate New York. The high-quality franks are then braised in smoked lard butter for an extra layer of richness and nestled in a warm toasty bun. The plain griddled dog actually starts at a more modest \$4, but the price climbs with every scoop of braised bacon, baked heirloom beans and homemade sauerkraut aged in Chardonnay barrels. Crunch tempura onion rings or crispy shoe string fries on the side, and refresh with a local craft beer. (Bark even hosts occasional beer and dog pairings.)

> Search for more on [Bark Hot Dogs](#)

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Ted's Hot Dogs - Tonawanda, N.Y. (2312 Sheridan Drive)

In 1913, Greek immigrant Theodore Spiro Liaros came to America and began operating a horse-drawn hot dog cart near the construction site for Buffalo's new Peace Bridge. When the bridge was completed in 1927, Liaros purchased a tool shed from the construction foreman's sister, where she'd been operating a sandwich shop for the workers, and the first stationary Ted's was born.

Fifty-two years later I was born, and spent much of my early life begging my parents for Ted's charcoal-broiled hot dogs and their famous homemade hot sauce. While the dog may never see the touristy acclaim enjoyed by the almighty chicken wing, Ted's has become a local legend and now operates [eight franchises](#) in greater Buffalo -- the oldest existing location being in Tonawanda -- plus one in ... Tempe, Ariz.?

> Search for more on [Ted's](#)

Gray's Papaya - New York (2090 Broadway)

It's not hard to find a hot dog in New York City. The key is finding one that hasn't spent the day bathing in a vat of murky, gray water (aka, the "dirty water dog"). N.Y.C. street cart dogs are perfectly good, but since I'm completely skeeved out by this water situation, I end up going to Gray's

Papaya for my New York dogs, which in my opinion are better than Nathan's.

Gray's started in 1973 as a knockoff of the much older Papaya King, and like its predecessor mastered the curious pairing of cheap hot dogs (\$1.25) and tropical juice. I assure you the combination works just as well as, say, white wine and whatever wine geeks say goes with white wine. Their natural-casing all-beef dogs are -- like most in NYC -- made by Sabrett's parent company Marathon. They're grilled to a slight char and go best with Gray's spicy mustard and sauerkraut.

Much of the Gray's Papaya experience is in the décor. For some reason their dogs just taste better amongst an assemblage of bright red and yellow signage touting slogans like, "LET'S BE FRANK...BUY OUR FURTERS." (Additional locations at 539 8th Ave. & 402 Avenue of the Americas.)

> Search for more on [Gray's Papaya](#)



Rutt's Hut - Clifton, N.J. (417 River Road)

I recently made my way to Clifton, N.J., where I polished off three deep-fried hot dogs, a heaping plate of fries and a diet cola. The source of my meal? Rutt's Hut, a sprawling 80-year-old restaurant and hot dog counter best known for serving New Jersey-style "deep-fried" hot dogs.

A deep-fried Rutt's Hut hot dog

Northern Jersey is like a museum of mid-century American roadside dining, where diners, burger stands and, in this case, hot dog dealers manage to fend off the new, franchised suburbia. Because there's really no need for a mega-zesty-smokehouse-bloomin'-BBQ-rollup-sandwich-wrap when you have access to Rutt's "Ripper," their classic dog, deep-fried until the casing rips open. Rippers also come rare ("in and out") or fried to a charry, smoky crisp (the "Cremator") and are made of a beef and pork blend by Thumann's. They're best topped with Rutt's tangy homemade pickle relish.

My afternoon at Rutt's wasn't the healthiest, but co-owner Gus Chrisafinis' expert frying skills temporarily made me forget that things like salad even existed.

> Search for more on [Rutt's Hut](#)



Hot Doug's in Chicago. The hot dog arrived in this city in 1893.

Hot Doug's - Chicago (3324 N. California Ave.)

In 1893, Chicago hosted the World's Columbian Exposition to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus discovering the New World. But Chicagoans turned their attention from European colonization to something equally monumental: the hot dog.

After being formally introduced at the fair, the wiener craze took off and soon hot dogs were being sold from street carts in the city's German and Polish neighborhoods. The dog has become a Chicago icon and according to Sam Weller, author of "Secret Chicago," the city has more hot dog vendors than McDonald's, Wendy's and Burger Kings combined.

The typical Chicago dog is boiled or steamed and topped with diced onion, tomato wedges, radioactive green relish, mustard, a pickle spear and a hint of celery salt (ketchup doesn't fly in Chicago). Combing through the list of authentic Chicago hot dog vendors would take all day, but you can't go wrong with the big-names: [Fluky's](#), [Murphy's](#), [Byron's](#), [Gene & Jude's](#), [Superdawg](#) -- and my personal favorite based solely on the name, the [Wieners Circle](#).

Having not spent much time in Chicago myself, I sought out Chicago Magazine food writer Jeff Ruby for a local's opinion on where to get the best dog. Jeff says, "When I get a craving for an honest Chicago dog, I go to Hot Doug's and get in line like everyone else. It's got all these incredible specials, like andouille and lamb and pheasant dogs, but I love the tender snap of the classic Chicago dog, which is still only \$1.75. The owner, Doug Sohn, graduated from culinary school and actually looks kind of like a sausage."

> Search for more about [Hot Doug's](#)

The Varsity - Atlanta (61 North Ave.)

No offense to the Varsity, but you don't go to the world's largest drive-in for the taste. You go for the atmosphere.

Varsity's dogs are fine -- and even finer when topped with their homemade chili and washed down with a fittingly retro Frosted Orange drink, known to locals simply as the "FO." But it's the stainless steel, glass brick walls, and Happy Days atmosphere that make the Varsity one of the best hot dog shops in the country. It's right out of a Beach Boys song -- just replace glistening ocean and surfer girls with skyscrapers and Ted Turner.

> Search for more about the [Varsity](#)



Pink's Hot Dogs is one of Hollywood's few constants.

Otto's Sausage Kitchen - Portland, Ore. (4138 S.E. Woodstock Blvd.)

On my first trip to Portland I was too blinded by coffee, micro-beers and the most inventive doughnuts in the country to appreciate the hot dog opportunity sitting mere miles from my hotel -- a mistake I'll never make again.

Named for founder Otto Eichentopf, Otto's Sausage Kitchen has occupied the same Southeast Portland location since 1929. The butcher and deli serves over 50 types of sausage and is now run by Otto's grandson Jerry, who, aside from sharing his family's extremely sausage-y last name, still makes their classic pork and beef wiener out of old-world German tradition.

Otto's dogs are made from locally farmed meat brought to life in their old fashioned smokehouse using alder wood. Jerry enticingly describes the

smoking process as a "meat bonfire." The shop uses only natural sheep casings, grills their dogs over charcoal for extra flavor and keeps it simple in terms of toppings, offering only sauerkraut, sweet relish, mustard, ketchup and onions.

> Search for more about [Otto's Sausage Kitchen](#)

Bacon Dog Cart - [San Francisco](#) (Mission District)

At some point in the mid-20th century, Mexico borrowed the all-American hot dog and made it their own -- by wrapping it in bacon. Now, America's taking it back: this meat-wrapped-in-other-meat phenomenon has pushed north into California. The magnetic odor of grilled pork wafts heaviest in San Francisco's Mission District where a minuscule street cart peddles the city's favorite bacon-bound dogs (\$3). All-beef franks are wrapped tightly in bacon, grilled to a crispy-good char and topped with caramelized onions, mustard, ketchup, and grilled jalapeños. Expect late-night revelers in various stages of beeriness.

> Search for more about [Bacon Dog Cart](#)

Pink's Hot Dogs - [Los Angeles](#) (709 N. La Brea Ave.)

In a city where careers are made and broken in the time it takes to grill a hot dog, Pink's is one of Hollywood's few constants -- a place where families, struggling actors and the show-biz elite temporarily unite in the common pursuit of hot dogs.

Started as a pushcart in 1939 by Paul and Betty Pink, Pink's eventually graduated to its current location in a building on the corner of La Brea and Melrose. Their all-beef dogs are long, thin and naturally cased for that satisfying snap -- they're best topped with Pink's homemade chili, but it's hard to resist the double-dogged tortilla-bound offerings, like the Bacon or Pastrami Burrito Dogs.

A few lucky celebs have seen their orders immortalized on Pink's menu. The Martha Stewart is a shirt stain waiting to happen, with mustard, relish, onions, chopped tomatoes, sauerkraut, bacon and sour cream, while Ozzy Osbourne's isn't much better: Polish sausage, nacho cheese, American cheese, grilled onions, guacamole and chopped tomatoes. Legend has it Orson Welles once downed 18 Pink's dogs in one sitting.

> Search for more about [Pink's Hot Dogs](#)

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Bret Stetka is a science, medical and food writer based in Brooklyn, NY. He founded and operates [Blognut](#), a blog dedicated to covering all things "donut" both stateside and abroad.

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