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CHIEF BEEF



Fall in love all over again with Chicago's hero—
just don't get the gravy on your shirt **pages 16-17**

LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE

eat & drink

GET TO KNOW THE WINNER OF REDEYE'S BEST SANDWICH TOURNAMENT

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

There are things, for all time, which are decidedly the essence of Chicago: the Belushis, Michael Jordan, The Second City, thick-fingered Old Style-drinking dudes who pronounce the word sausage as “saah-sidge,” the Sears—err, Willis—Tower, hot dogs dragged through the garden and deep-dish pizza. The most underrated of these, or maybe the least known outside the shores of Lake Michigan, is the Italian beef sandwich.

When I arrived here in 2001, my realtor Joe Quartana, a second-generation Irving Park resident and a serious food lover who always “had a guy” whenever I needed something done, introduced me to the local delicacy. Quartana has since then helped me buy and sell three homes, but he changed my Chicago life not through realty—it was when he bought me my first beef.

He took me to the original Al's on Taylor Street and then Johnnie's in northwest suburban Elmwood Park. He saved me embarrassment by warning me of the “no cheese” rule, and cut down on my dry-cleaning bills by briefing me on the “Italian stance,” whereby you hold the beef at a 45-degree angle to the counter and lean over the sandwich, so the beef gravy (not jus, not juice, just gravy) lands below ya, but not on ya.

The Italian beef, in case you're not familiar (and that's doubtful, as hundreds of RedEye readers recently crowned it the king of all sandwiches in our bracket-style Best Sandwich Tournament), is usually a cheaper cut of beef—top round, butt or sirloin—roasted and spiced, drenched in gravy, nestled in a crusty white Italian roll and topped with either hot or sweet giardiniera. Many Chicagoans often truncate this to “giardinere,” but either way, its rough translation from Italian is “from the garden” and it's an assortment of peppers, celery, carrots and other vegetables packed in oil and occasionally vinegar.

Serve it with cheese, and you've got a Philly cheesesteak. Add a cup of jus on the side and it's a French dip. The French dip predates the Italian beef by 30 years or so, meaning the Italian beef is likely a descendant. The local origins are murky and contested, but most sources agree the originator was either Pasquale Scala, who established his namesake packing company in 1925 and served the Depression-era snack at weddings, or Al Ferreri and his sister-and brother-in-law Frances and Chris Pacelli Sr., who served it at the original

Al's in Little Italy on Harrison and Laffin streets in 1938. The Pacellis later relocated to 1079 W. Taylor St., where they remain today.

The beef has made its way (through Al's franchising) as far as San Jose, Calif., and Jay Leno brought Mr. Beef on “Late Night with David Letterman” in 1989 (before they were archrivals).

Though it has a storied history, Chicagoans are often divided on the supremacy of beef. Royal Lichter, a North Side realtor and local foodie, said, “The idea of Italian beef is great, but mostly [are] very poorly executed. ... I would not feel comfortable representing this to any visitor or even most Chicagoans. It could be Chicago's gift to the world, but not the average one.” Alan Lake—a local chef and restaurant consultant (most recently at Chief O'Neill's), avid **LTHforum.com** poster and author of the forthcoming book “Garlic Manifesto”—grew up eating Al's sandwiches “al trunko ... on my brother's deuce-and-a-quarter ragtop,” he said. “It's the bee's knees. The real deal. The Mahatma Gandhi.”

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HERE'S THE BEEF





Italian beef at Joe Boston's Italian Beef
JASON LEE/THE PHOTOS FOR RED EYE

THREE TO TRY

What better way to spend an afternoon than sinking my teeth into some of my favorite Italian beef sandwiches around town? I focused on places within city limits, but any discussion of beefs also should include the aforementioned Johnnie's in Elmwood Park (notably their combo, a beef stuffed with a spicy Italian sausage link) plus two other suburban notables: Scatchell's in Cicero, which has a well-salted beef topped with fresh celery, and Chickies in Hillside, where the shaved spicy green-pepper giardiniera is one-of-a-kind. For the purposes of this tasting session and to level-set the field, I ordered all beefs dipped (the whole sandwich is dunked in the gravy) and topped with hot giardiniera. **—M**

Joe Boston's Italian Beef

2932 W. Chicago Ave. 773-466-9535

Price: \$5.50

Founded in 1949 as a social club, Joe Boston's son-in-law Spero Kutrubis still runs the place. Boston's cooks its beef in-house and slices it paper-thin on a deli slicer. There's a hint of oregano and lots of black pepper specks. The Italian loaves they use held up well to the gravy. The vinegary giardiniera here is packed with carrots and cauliflower, and the acidic tang of the veggies sliced through and offset the richness of the beef.



Al's Beef

1079 W. Taylor St. 312-226-4017

Price: \$6.05

Though they've franchised, I think the original location still makes the best. They cook their top sirloin butts in-house with a proprietary blend of herbs and spices. There's a sweet top-note—perhaps nutmeg or allspice—that no other beef in the city possesses. The meat is so tender, it disintegrates into tiny shards, merges with the gravy-soaked bun and is punctuated with whole bits of coriander.

Al's gravy is the ultimate in beefiness, flavored with rich fatty suet that you taste in an old-school French fry. The orange bun-staining giardiniera also includes slices of fennel. Any beef-eating here is enhanced by the signed photo of former Gov. Rod Blagojevich—encased behind bars and stuck with a label noting His Hairness's "parole day" as "Jan 2023"—that hangs in the dining room.



The Patio

1503 W. Taylor St. 312-829-0454

Price: \$4.60

Opened in 1948, The Patio calls its sandwich "Italian Roast Beef." This is the thickest cut of the ones I tasted, more reminiscent of a plated slice of roast beef than the paper-thin meat at Boston's or the shard-like meat of Al's. This beef had a nice bit of pepper, but was the least seasoned and could have used a touch more salt. The roll was still crispy and the least dipped. The giardiniera was fiery—the hottest of the bunch—and loaded with fresh curls of sliced celery.

