

Madison: Sandwich city

Our kitchens outdo themselves when it comes to the hallmark of a humble lunch

By Raphael Kadushin

The food you love most is the food you covet when you're the hungriest, and for me that isn't anything stylish or haute. I don't salivate over foie gras and caviar. I don't fantasize about any cunning molecular amuse-bouche, or a deconstructed strawberry shortcake, or duck three ways (one way is enough, thanks). No. What I picture when I'm really starving, when I'm itchy for the best bite, is something simpler.

What I imagine is the perfect sandwich.

I'm not sure why that is. I think maybe it's a case of culinary memory, since the sandwich is probably the first meal I really loved, as a kid, my homelier version of Proust's poor over-referenced Madeleine.

But I think it's also because a sandwich is the most complete sort of meal. The way a crusty slice of bread plays off a wedge of buttery cheese and a sheet of cured meat and a dollop of fresh mayonnaise is a little lesson in texture and flavor. At its best, it's unrivaled.

And maybe my hunger for the sandwich has something to do with Madison itself. Because when I think of the meals that have made the biggest impression on me locally, at least most recently, the meal is lunch, and the dish is a sandwich.

In fact, the creativity, whimsy and ambition of our best restaurants, and chefs, come through most clearly when they turn the sandwich into high art. And that means the best taste of Madison often comes at noon.

What are some of the local standouts? One of my top choices would be Gotham Bagels, which has added a whole new dimension to the downtown dining scene and which I'd rate as highly as any of the most ambitious, pricey restaurants in town for one simple reason: It does what it sets out to do perfectly, and what it sets out to do is make the perfect bagel. That may seem like a small thing to some people, but the perfect bagel is a wonder. After years of being subjected to the spongy, porous, tasteless faux bagels that haunted too many local lunch counters, I regard the Gotham bagel as an epic thing.

It's also a lesson in what makes a good sandwich, because a sandwich starts and ends with the frame, the bread, and if that isn't right, the sandwich won't be either. And the Gotham bagel frame is so good it doesn't need anything but a smear of cream cheese, and it doesn't really even need that.

These are hand-rolled, fresh-out-of-the-oven bagels. The golden crust crackles and the "meat" of the bagel has just the right amount of chew. The variations run the full gamut



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(onion, garlic, poppy, egg, pumpernickel, salt, everything) but it's the sesame, which offers a toasted, nutty accent, that is Gotham's queen. Add cream cheese, watercress for a nice layer of texture and translucent, pale pink lox (smoked Alaskan salmon in this case), and you simply have the best, most elegant sandwich, and meal, in town.

Though there are some Gotham rivals. The "Long-guy-land" sandwich, which layers fontina cheese, house-roasted turkey breast, arugula, tomato and mayo, makes for a perfectly balanced, subtle hoagie, the understated play of the turkey and fontina set off by the mayo and those sesame seeds again. And for anyone who wants something more exuberant, a two-fisted sandwich, the louder Canarsie, which stacks up mortadella, salami, capicola, provolone, arugula, tomato and hot giardiniera vinaigrette, is the only meal you'll need all day.

But the bagel sandwiches are only one of Gotham's gifts. The other reason the place has become such a revelation to me is that it serves something else I thought I'd never see in Madison — a memorable pastrami sandwich. Gotham's high pile of pastrami on toasted rye with a squirt of mustard is a lesson in how to do things right. That's because this pastrami is shaved fresh off the brisket, in thin tender slices laced with just enough fat to add the richest flavor; and the stack of crumbling, silky meat is as seductive as anything you'd get in one of New York's few remaining authentic delis. ♦

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