

# It's an Eat-Dog World

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*Pickle in the middle, mustard on the top.  
That's the way we like 'em,  
and they're all red hot!*



**T**wo or three generations ago, fathers chanted this ditty as they turned hot dogs on the backyard grill. The ditty may have faded away, but the hot dog still holds its place in our hearts—and arteries—despite what we have learned about the dangers of fat, mad cows, and nitrates.

Like other 20th-century children raised on summer cookouts and Saturday-night franks and beans, we still succumb to the allure of a good dog in irresistible circumstances: a Sox game at Fenway, a roadside trailer in a country town, a cart at the beach. We began to wonder where the best of these places were, and how to find them. So we started asking around for people's favorite hot dog stands, and before we knew it, we had launched a full-fledged quest, juggling maps on the dashboard as we zigzagged through four states.

The depth of passionate opinion on this subject took us by surprise. Many folks who don't often eat hot dogs volunteered to accompany us to their favorite wienerie, where they munched like true veterans.

Also interesting is how far fans are willing to travel for their favorite wieners. Ormonde Brown of Wilmington, for instance, says he stops at Hot Dog Annie's in Worcester whenever he can. Bob and Helen Baker, who own Bakers Country Store in Conway, Mass., and serve a mean dog themselves, urged us to visit Flo's in Cape Neddick, Maine.

This passion told us how emotionally charged a good frankfurter can be, sizzling itself into memory and conjuring associations with good times. In short, some times a hot dog is not just a hot dog, it's a bit of Americana, a bite of nostalgia that binds us to a happier past, if only in the imagination.

All this ruminating, not to mention the mind-boggling variety of hot dog types and presentations, prompted us to Google up some hot dog history. A few tidbits of fact and legend: The first reference to sausage, the granddaddy of the hot dog, appeared in "The Odyssey," written by Homer about 800 BC. Popular legend credits a German butcher for creating the first "dachhund" (little dog) sausage in 1690. Austrians counter that the wiener was born in Vienna (a.k.a. Wien) in 1805. Then we have the Germans of Frankfurt claiming they invented the true frankfurter in 1852. (All this is courtesy of Linda Stradley's [whatscookingamerica.com](http://whatscookingamerica.com).)

German immigrants brought the hot dog to the United States, probably in the 1860s, and by 1867, Charles Feltman, a German butcher, had rolled out one of the first hot dog stands, on Coney Island, N.Y.

Originally called "red hots," wienies, or frankfurters, hot dogs were reputedly given their present name by a sports cartoonist in 1901. Vendors sold the first dogs in "dog carts" hauled by horses, then by tractors,

and finally by trucks. Later, they just parked in choice locations near shops and factories. One of the last existing dog carts in New England, built in 1940 by the Worcester Diner Co., is Gilley's on Fleet Street in Portsmouth, N.H.

As hot dogs proliferated, vendors vied to stand out from the pack, taking pride in their brands, condiments, and special recipes.

"You won't find this kind of hot dog anywhere else," was a statement we heard repeatedly as one was handed over the counter. Formulas for sauces and toppings are as closely guarded as any other family secret. One employee at George's Coney Island in Worcester told us, "I've worked here for years, and I don't even know how our chili sauce is made."

Some vendors, such as the folks at Flo's in Maine, have capitalized on the cachet of secrecy and sell bottles of their special toppings.

Unique flourishes aside, most doggeries share common location themes. Anyplace where people stream into the street at lunch hour, someone will be selling hot dogs. Most are freestanding islands in a sea of pavement, but there are exceptions. George's Coney Island, a palace among dog vendors, occupies a spacious storefront with a spectacular neon hot-dog marquee above the front door. Surprisingly, a number of establishments still occupy their original buildings and retain period decor dating to as long ago as 1912.

But enough romance. The facts are: We personally visited 17 places in Massachusetts, Maine, and New Hampshire and have ranked them in order of preference. We didn't hear of any places in Vermont, but we cruised Brattleboro anyway, and not even the firemen could tell us where we could find a good dog.

By now, it should be clear just how random and unscientific this all was. We are not food critics. Our choices are wildly subjective, and we discovered biases we didn't know we had, such as a preference for natural casings (they snap when you bite into them), strong flavor, firm but smooth texture, and grilled buns (although steamed buns, if not too soggy, can be scrumptious, too). Because we liked steamed and grilled dogs equally, we've ranked the samplings in



two categories. The top five in each ran pretty evenly.

By the way, if you visit any of these places during lunch hour, plan to stand in line.

Meanwhile, we know dozens of other fabulous wiener wagons are out there waiting to be discovered. If you want to know where they are, just ask a friend.

## THE LIST

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### GRILLED

#### **Bolley's Famous Franks**

38 Water St. (Route 201)

Hallowell, Maine

207-622-2951

Take out or eat in

Basic hot dog \$1.43

The best of the best, and cheap to boot. This dog with a salty zest (it's grilled with salt pork) has a crispy skin cushioned by a soft steamed bun. If you ask for a dog with everything, they'll ask if you also want ketchup, letting you know that this newfangled condiment is in questionable taste. Bolley's Formica-tables eaterie has been around since the 1950s, also serving breakfast. ...