

BEST SANDWICHES

Author: Elin Jeffords, Geri Koeppel, Carey Sweet & Gwen Ashley Walters

Issue: January, 2010, Page 95



Photos by David Moore

Avalon's flat iron steak on ciabatta with sautéed onions

LOVE A GOOD SANDWICH? JOIN THE CLUB. OUR FOOD CRITICS HAVE BEEN CHOMPING AWAY TO FIND THE VALLEY'S 21 BEST SAMMIES, FROM ROAST BEEF, REUBENS AND LOBSTER ROLLS TO CROQUE MADAMES AND CARNE ASADA. AS THE LUNCH GOD IS OUR WITNESS, YOU'LL NEVER BE HUNGRY AGAIN.

HERE ARE A FEW OF OUR FAVORITE FOOD REVIEWERS' TOP PICKS. COME BACK TO SEE THE REST OF THEIR 'BEST SANDWICHES'!

Elin's Picks

Flat Iron Steak

Avalon

Most steak sandwiches are pretty straightforward: unadorned, grilled hunks of meat slapped onto bread. In comparison, there's something almost dainty about the one served at Avalon. That's not to say it's wimpy – far from it. But the quality of ingredients and the amount of effort that goes

into the construction takes it almost into the realm of haute cuisine.

Chef Travis Watson starts with a generous-sized prime flat iron steak and cooks it to order. The exterior is nicely caramelized, the inside moist and juicy, bursting with beefy flavor. Slices of sweet cipollini onion and teensy mushrooms are sautéed in olive oil and the pan deglazed with brandy. Minced herbs are sprinkled in along with an enriching pat of butter, and then the steak gets placed onto a toasted slice of chewy ciabatta and topped with the veggie mixture. (\$13)

Info: 7707 E. McDowell Road, Scottsdale; 480-656-0010, avalon-scottsdale.com

The Murano

Switch

Staff members at Switch take their sandwiches seriously. In addition to a roster of 15 standard options, they also offer sandwich-like permutations, such as puff-pastry galettes, panini, stuffed crêpes and pitas. Excellent product and careful construction go hand-in-hand with some audacious combinations here. Among the standouts is the Murano. As the name suggests, it has a Mediterranean theme. It starts with an excellent, crusty artisanal roll, piled high with just the right proportion of mild roasted chicken and salty prosciutto. A layer of Gouda cheese brings a little tang to the party, and chopped Greek olives, ripe tomato and a slick of aioli finish it off. (\$9.95)

Info: 2603 N. Central Ave., Phoenix; 602-264-2295, switchofarizona.com



The Stockyards' prime rib and cheddar on rye

Prime Rib & Cheddar

The Stockyards Restaurant

Not every sandwich gains a cult following. On the other hand, The Stockyards' prime rib and cheddar is not your ordinary sandwich. The beautifully restored historic restaurant has been serving this bad boy for more than 30 years. According to owner/manager Gary Lasko, it's by far the best-selling item on the lunch menu, with more than 6,000 sold each year. Many customers have never ordered anything else, he says.

Greater than the sum of its parts, the sandwich is built on two slices of rye bread brushed on both sides with butter and lightly browned on a flat top. Seven ounces of lean, shaved prime rib are piled on half of it and then topped with creamy Colby cheese. Ramekins of natural jus and incendiary horseradish sauce complete the picture. Tip: As soon as it's served, flip the sandwich over

so the meat is on top. It slows down the seep of savory juices and keeps the sandwich from deconstructing. (\$14)

Info: 5009 E. Washington St., Phoenix; 602-273-7378, stockyardsrestaurant.com

Chicken-Fried Steak **TEXAZ Grill**



TEXAZ Grill's famous chicken-fried steak sandwich

Sandwiches are generally not the first thing that comes to mind when mentioning TEXAZ Grill. But it makes sense that the dish the restaurant is best known for – chicken-fried steak (723,000-plus served and counting) – makes a lunchtime appearance on a bun. That toasted, sesame-flecked burger bun is almost laughable in the context of two massive slabs of round steak that have been pounded to a fare-thee-well, double-dipped with flour and buttermilk and quick-fried. (The exact recipe is a well-kept secret).

For some reason, the creamy white gravy that normally accompanies the regular steak has to be ordered on the side. However, it's a must-have – glopped on the meat, then heavily peppered and sprinkled with Tabasco sauce. That's how they do it in Texas, and it's a giant-sized treat. (\$6.50; 50 cents for side of gravy)

Info: 6003 N. 16th St., Phoenix; 602-248-STAR (7827), texazgrill.com

Gerri's Picks

Warm Roast Beef The Deli

Delis in the desert can be an ugly prospect: Flabby, over-processed lunchmeat and limp produce are what pass for a sandwich in too many outlets today. But this isn't a typical deli. Décor resembles a casual but chic wine country restaurant, and chef Blake Mastyk and his family make almost everything from scratch. That means meats, including top round for the roast beef, are roasted and sliced no more than a day or two before they're served. It doesn't get shipped from who-knows-where and never has preservatives.

The beef is served on a Simply Bread baguette with a hint of horseradish cream sauce, caramelized onions, roasted bell peppers and melted pepper jack cheese. Much of the produce is from neighboring Queen Creek farms. The place even hosts a farmers' market on Saturdays, so even the veggies burst with flavor. (\$9)



The Deli's warm roast beef with horseradish cream

Info: 18914 E. San Tan Blvd., Queen Creek; 480-279-3546, thedeliqc.com

The Reuben House of Tricks

Most people wouldn't dream of going to Tricks for a simple sandwich. Salads, yes. Quiche, yes. And those elegant entrées, yes. But Chef Kelly Fletcher got it in his head to achieve sandwich perfection with his lunch menu, and by George, he's got it with the understated but satisfying Reuben.

First, he cures the beef in-house, and it's amazing: buttery, gristle-free and not too salty. Then he adds real, house-made Russian dressing – none of that goopy cheater's sauce, Thousand Island – but not too much, so it doesn't soak through the bread. From there, he uses the best ingredients he can find. A soft marble rye from Wildflower is easy to bite into and provides a boost of flavor. High-quality sauerkraut is not pungent or watery. Imported Comté adds texture and tang.

It's not a heaping heart-attack-on-a-plate like most deli Reubens, but it's civilized enough to eat with your hands until the last bite. (\$9.50)

Info: 114 E. Seventh St., Tempe; 480-968-1114, houseoftricks.com

The Cochinita Tortas el Güero

Tortas, those big-as-your-head layered Mexican sandwiches, can hardly get better than those at Tortas el Güero, a family-owned mini-chain. It's tough to choose a favorite, but we'll settle on the cochinita: sweet and salty pork slow-cooked for two hours and then simmered with achiote, spices and orange juice. It's heaped onto a loaf of golden toasted white bread (house-made at one of their Phoenix shops), kissed with mayonnaise and butter, and loaded up with avocado, lettuce, tomato and pickled jalapeño peppers. Esquire magazine called it one of the best sandwiches in America in May 2008.

Gustavo and Marjorie Lom opened the first location in Phoenix in 2002; Gustavo's parents, Arturo and Imelda Lom, started the Mesa location in 2007. Arturo was a meat cutter for 40 years and previously owned a carnicería in Phoenix. The oversized photos on the walls of the Mesa store are of his five grandkids. (\$6)

Info: 1449 E. Main St., Mesa, 480-649-4288; 2518 N. 16th St., Phoenix, 602-252-9228; 4121 E. Thomas Road, Phoenix, 602-840-2889



Place your photo caption here

Tomato, Basil & Mozzarella Pane Bianco

Chris Bianco made his name by treating the previously lowly pizza with every bit of care as the finest dishes in a three-star Michelin restaurant. "The goal's always been to do something that's not compromised," he says. Following that philosophy, sandwiches at his carryout place, Pane Bianco, elevate the humble lunchtime favorite to new heights. Take the tomato, basil and mozzarella, for instance.

First, the rustic bread is baked in a wood-fired oven. It's layered with local goodness, including One Windmill Farm's meaty tomatoes, Bob McClendon's basil and house-made mozzarella. The fillings are just below room temperature for the optimum taste profile. It's drizzled with a custom blend of Queen Creek Olive Oil and sprinkled with fleur de sel and fresh ground black pepper. It has

no exotic ingredients, no sleight of hand with presentation. But taste one, and you'll see what the fuss is about. (\$8)

Info: 4404 N. Central Ave., Phoenix; 602-234-2100, pizzeriabianco.com



Photo by

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Carey's Picks

Croque Madame Petite Maison

Chef James Porter knows the finer stuff of classic French cooking (his bone marrow in red wine gastrique is ooh-la-la). Yet come lunch or weekend brunch, we welcome the company of his Croque Madame, a beguiling beauty of thinly shaved, slightly sweet French Bayonne ham, gooey Gruyère and a perfect fried egg cradled between two halves of a lightly toasted croissant. (Without the egg it's simply a Croque Monsieur.)

This is a knife-and-fork meal: Cut into the sandwich, the egg releases its buttery yolk, and then use bits of torn croissant to sop it up. There's mornay sauce, of course, but here's a different pairing you'll want to try, too: Porter's house-made dip, a thick blend of whole-grain mustard, malt vinegar, molasses and aioli. It comes in a crock alongside a mound of crisp, seasoned shoestring fries, perfect for dunking. (\$8; \$7 without the egg)

Info: 7612 E. Shoeman Lane, Scottsdale; 480-991-6887, petitemaisonaz.com

PB&J Pasties Cornish Pasty Co.

Resist the idea of your childhood PB&J sammy, a comforting if often disappointing smear of sugary peanut butter and sticky jelly on thin, bland white bread that quickly goes soggy. It's Cornish Pasty Co. to the rescue. Naturally, you must also resist the temptation to hum the jingle from the Hot Pockets commercial.

These fresh-made pasties are worlds better than the micro-meal, fashioned as hand-crimped dough bundles stuffed with fresh ingredients, then baked to a flaky, golden brown. The result is a bit like a monster empanada, a bit like a portable potpie, so you'll want to grab a knife and fork to plow in, scooping up oozy-delicious peanut butter, raspberry jam and warm banana slices.

It can be a filling entrée served plain, or if you're in a dessert frame of mind, the Cornish crew will smother it in billows of whipped cream. Irresistible! (\$5)

Info: 960 W. University Drive, Tempe, 480-894-6261; 1941 W. Guadalupe Road, Mesa, 480-838-3586; cornishpastyco.com

Salami, Pesto & Goat Cheese Bertha's Café

Any of Bertha's nearly two dozen sandwiches, wraps, panini and tortas are excellent. (We particularly like the breakfast brioche topped with bacon, arugula, pesto and Parmesan, while dessert might be peanut butter, raspberry jam, bananas and Nutella served warm on brioche). But the most delicious deal of all is the combo, because the casual, friendly-as-can-be Bertha's encourages us to mix and match from any half-sandwich plus a cup of homemade soup or a generous helping of any of the gourmet salads, finished with chips and a cookie.

May we suggest this flavor explosion? A tangy layering of Italian dry salami, pesto, sun-dried tomato and goat cheese on chewy Simply Bread ciabatta, paired with Thai chicken salad in a crunchy rainbow of carrot, cabbage, cucumber, bell pepper, tomato, peanuts and chicken (pesto-roasted in-house) tossed in spicy peanut dressing. Oh, baby! (\$7.50 for combo; \$6.50 for sandwich alone)



The Salami, Pesto & Goat Cheese sandwich at Bertha's Café

Info: 3134 E. Indian School Road, Phoenix; 602-955-1022, berthascafe.com

Corned Beef Chestnut Lane

Owners Polly Levine and Marilena Sacks serve up sandwiches that are delicious as all-get-out at this tiny, cute-as-a-button cottage. They're pricey, too, but the bread comes from MJ, produce from McClendon's Select, and proteins from the boutique salumeria La Quercia.

So it's worth the \$12.75 to score the impossibly silky, rich corned beef from Niman Ranch, fashioned into an upscale, decadent Reuben on marble rye.

Technically, it's not a Reuben – it comes capped in Vidalia onion, Guinness mustard, fontina cheese, diced red pepper and house-

made sweet pickles instead of sauerkraut and Swiss.

It's not piled deli mile-high either – it's compact, and the bread's edges are crisp from a panini press. But it's so deliriously juicy, savory, salty, sweet, crunchy and soft all at once, adding up to a pretty sensational sandwich. (\$12.75)

Info: 4225 E. Camelback Road, Phoenix; 602-535-5439, chestnutlanecafe.com

Gwen's Picks

"Pulled" Squash

Bryan's Black Mountain Barbecue

Get it? "Pulled" is an old BBQ term describing slow-cooked pork and chicken, shredded into slivers of smoky animal flesh. Not everyone loves meat though, so Chef Bryan Dooley cleverly came up with his pulled spaghetti squash sandwich. The yellow winter squash shreds into skinny strands when roasted (hence the name "spaghetti"), making it a perfect vegetarian "pulled" option for a barbecue sandwich.

Dooley puts the sweet squash on the same oversized, buttered, toasted bun he uses for his brisket, pork and pulled chicken sandwiches and douses it with his tangy, beer-laden barbecue sauce. For \$1 more, top it with a fried egg for a little protein and you've got a tasty, creative vegetarian 'cue sandwich. All sandwiches come with a side, and vegetarian options include chips, French fries, "baked" potato salad or the delicious olive-studded, creamy coleslaw. Like a little spice? Bite into the accompanying sweet-hot pickled jalapeño that comes with every meal. (\$6.50)



The "Pulled" Squash at Bryan's Black Mountain Barbecue

Info: 6130 E. Cave Creek Road, Cave Creek; 480-575-7155, bryansbbq.com

Carne Asada Torta America's Taco Shop

There is one meat option – and only one – at America's Taco Shop: carne asada. A flap cut (similar to a flank or skirt cut) of choice beef is marinated in citrus, garlic and chiles and grilled over a gas flame. The beef is chopped into fine pieces (enter the taco shop any time and hear the staccato chop, chop, chop) and stuffed into a toasted telera roll from La Reyna bakery.

With a simple smear of mayo, guacamole and a topping of shredded iceberg, sliced tomatoes and pickled jalapeños, this carne asada torta is always juicy, thanks to a final pour of the meat's juices just before it leaves the kitchen. Sides are extra, like \$1.50 for a basket of chips and fresh salsa or soupy pintos, but don't miss the street corn (\$2.50), a tender cob rolled in mayo and sprinkled with tangy cotija cheese and chile powder. (\$5.95)

Info: 2041 N. Seventh St., Phoenix; 602-682-5627, americastacoshop.net

Bacon-Wrapped Parmesan Meatloaf Jaspers Peak

They had us at "bacon-wrapped." Meatloaf can be decadent on its own, but Jaspers ups the wow factor by using a mix of ground beef and ground pork along with a handful of grated Parmesan cheese. The loaf is wrapped in smoky bacon and baked to juicy perfection. But that's not all. A slab of cheddar cheese is melted on top. The umpteen-calorie sandwich arrives open-faced, with a toasted ciabatta bun slathered with Dijon mustard and creamy remoulade and garnished with lettuce, tomato and pickle.

Alongside is a shot of sweet caramelized onions to smear over the thick, cheese-covered slab of meatiness. This monster requires a knife and fork, although we've seen daredevils attempt to manhandle it – with varying degrees of success. Sides include a choice of beer-battered fries mixed with sweet potato fries, hearty gumbo or a mesclun salad. (\$10)

Info: 20511 N. Hayden Road, Ste. 100, Scottsdale; 480-563-3255, jasperspeakbistro.com



The bacon-wrapped Parmesan meatloaf at Jaspers Peak, served with sweet potato fries

times – poached in a special broth, marinated in a mixture of spices and then hand shredded before a final stir fry with crispy garlic. A smear of lemongrass and garlic-scented mayonnaise and lightly pickled shredded carrots, cucumber, lettuce and a handful of fresh cilantro complete the sandwich. (\$5)

Info: 7000 E. Mayo Blvd., Phoenix; 480-538-1600

DON'T FORGET TO COME BACK FOR MORE OF OUR FOOD REVIEWERS' BEST SANDWICHES!

Chicken Sandwich Tea Light Café

Owner Reyness Price is all about health, so the offerings at her Vietnamese café incorporate ingredients that promote healthy digestive systems. She custom blends teas (like green Sencha with pomegranate and rose hips) and incorporates ginger and lemongrass into the broths and marinades used to make her noodle soups (pho) and sandwiches. We're particularly smitten with the chicken sandwich, which resembles a banh mi but isn't a traditional one (Price is actually half French and half Japanese, although her manager is from Vietnam.)

The warm, lightly toasted bread is baked fresh daily specifically for Tea Light. It's soft on the inside yet crusty and flaky on the outside. Price cooks her all-white chicken breast three



Chicken Sandwich at Tea Light Café