

Building the Modern Sandwich

Today's sandwich innovation is borne from true character study
By Joan Lang

As innovation continues to drive menu strategy, it's important to look at what exactly that means for different menu items. It's not always about pushing comfort zones further afield into global flavor discovery or creating unexpected flavor combinations. In the sandwich category, innovation can mean delivering a regionally specific experience. Or it can mean adding premium protein cues. Whatever the path, successful innovation in this category can lead to repeat traffic. Why? Everyone loves a good sandwich.

REAL AND REGIONAL

"A lot of our customers still order the same sandwich every time, and that's fine with us," says Jeff Sinelli, whose title at Which Wich is Chief Vibe Officer. When he founded the Dallas-based chain more than 10 years ago, his mission was to go up against the sub-chain giants with a level of quality, variety and customization that would provide a clear point of differentiation. The chain's motto is: "Crave Interesting."

Now, more than a decade in and 400-plus units strong, Sinelli is well aware that the game has to be stepped up against many new competitors. "My mentor Phil Romano [founder of Fuddruckers and Macaroni Grill, among others] told me something years ago that I've never forgotten: 'As a concept ages, you need to make it more authentic,'" he says. Today, authenticity and innovation walk in step. Consumers seek out authentic experiences through both product sourcing and product narrative.

"We've created our new Bag 8 program to bring authenticity to our stores," says Sinelli. Bag 8 is not for those folks who have found the Which Wich they like and never waver from; the Bag 8 program consists of LTOs, specials, and other innovations brought in via R&D, customer feedback, vendor input, team member input, and all the other ways that menus stay fresh. Through Bag 8, Which Wich has launched an array of new sandwiches over the last 12 to 18 months.

Case in point is the immensely successful Philly cheesesteak. "It's easy to put one on the menu; it's much harder to make it authentic," says Sinelli. "You have to commit to the bread." Which Wich made a commitment to the iconic Amoroso's in Philadelphia, which is called out on the menu. Then there's the beef, the same kind that's used in Philadelphia. And ditto the Cheez Whiz. "We got instant response: 'I'm from Philly, and you guys just nailed it!' That's what we want to hear," says Sinelli. The sandwich was so successful that it was brought back in December for another two- to three-month run.

And the shrimp po'boy, which took the R&D team to New Orleans for a tasting trip, ended up with the company sourcing Gulf shrimp and partnering with Tabasco, Zapp's potato chips, and Barq's and Abita for authentic NOLA-style root beer. "It's the whole New Orleans experience," says Sinelli. "Everything but the beads." The



Southern cues make the Crispy Chicken Sandwich a hot seller at Bluestem Brasserie in San Francisco. Extra crispiness comes from cornmeal, buttermilk and a special blend of flours.

sandwich is dressed with regional accessories that help place it in its authentic landscape.

Likewise, the Mexican-style tortas that Sinelli and his team are experimenting with will be served with Mexican Coke in the glass bottle. He's even considering serving a medianoche (a Cuban-style sandwich traditionally enjoyed after the clubs close at midnight) in the wee hours from midnight until 3 a.m., because that's part of the authentic narrative of this particular specialty. And he'll bring in the slightly sweetish bun from Ybor City in Tampa, Fla., to complement the ham, roasted pork, cheese, pickles, mustard and mayonnaise that fills it.

PUMP UP THE PROTEIN

One way to modernize a sandwich while adding premium cues is by upgrading the protein. At Mendocino Farms Sandwich Market, with seven locations in Southern California, Founder and "Chief Sandwich Creator" Mario Del Pero grew up in a family of butchers from northern Italy, and the quality of the ingredients he enjoyed inspired him to open the restaurant. "We would have these giant Sunday suppers with lamb and osso buco and other butcher cuts, and for days afterward my father would use the leftovers to reconstruct these meals into sandwiches. He'd use lamb and a delicious chutney, or layer leftover fried risotto cakes in a sandwich with braised meat," says Del Pero. "And of course we didn't have traditional American cold cuts—we had mortadella and prosciutto and salami."

When the time came to open his own business, he took note of the upscale grocery stores like Dean & DeLuca, and how busy their sandwich counters were, sending out pricey \$12 to \$14 sandwiches. With shops like Subway and Quiznos offering lower-priced sandwiches, he saw that there was a huge gap for sandwiches that could sell in the \$8 to \$12 range.

"I realized there was a great opportunity for thoughtful, chef-designed sandwich builds based on center-of-plate quality proteins with scratch spreads and great bread," he says. "A place where the sandwiches were affordable enough that customers could come multiple times a week, and which had the comfortable ambience of a neighborhood sandwich shop."

In Del Pero's opinion, many typical sandwiches have cheap protein in them. "Take the banh mi. Like many street foods, it has the cheapest protein on the planet in it—pâté, head cheese, bologna. From a chef's point of view, however, those acid-forward flavor elements can handle a rich, almost-sweet protein, like braised, caramelized Kurobuta pork belly. We respect the ethnic tradition of the set, with the spicy elements of jalapeño and the super bright and tart pickles, and take it up a notch with high-quality protein."

For the Peruvian Steak Sandwich, the "Mendo-style" riff on a griddled Mexican cemita, Del Pero once again started with the typical sandwich set. "We sourced Oaxacan cheese, and the chefs are hand-pulling it for sandwiches." The upgrade comes in the form of USDA Choice hand-carved tenderloin, marinated in a Latin version of Sriracha that's electric yellow from the aji amarillo chiles (one of the sauce's 15 ingredients). "We call it our Yellow Rooster sauce, in an acknowledgement to Sriracha," notes Del Pero. Herb aioli, red onion, tomato and shredded romaine round out the sandwich.



Carved steak and prime applewood bacon upgrade the Steak BLT at Mendocino Farms, where an emphasis is placed on premium proteins.

Del Pero's latest obsession is smoked meat, gaining inspiration from pitmasters like Aaron Franklin of Austin's Franklin Barbecue and Noah Bernamoff of MileEnd Deli in New York, as well as Billy Durney of Hometown Bar-B-Que in Red Hook, Brooklyn, who helped him launch his smokehouse. The resulting Our House Smoked Pastrami Project with creamy apple coleslaw on rye is showcased at Blue Cow Kitchen & Bar, Del Pero's new full-service restaurant in Los Angeles. Eventually, Mendo will be serving smoked meats like pork butt and turkey as well, in sandwiches like a smoked pulled pork Cubano and a brisket club.

There's no doubt that successful sandwiches have distinct personalities. At Flancer's Incredible Sandwiches & Pizzeria, with locations in Mesa and Gilbert, Ariz., the sandwich names take owner Jeff Flancer's lighthearted approach to life. His sandwiches are classics with a twist, offering housemade everything, from the New Mexico green chile mayonnaise and roasted turkey on the Ace of Clubs to all the breads—even whole-wheat wraps, which are rolled and baked to order.

Not surprisingly, the authentic Steak It to The Limit Philly Cheesesteak is the top seller, but anything with New Mexico green chile mayonnaise—the Chile Verde Birdie Turkey, The Perfect “Prickly” Pear Chicken, in which the breast is marinated in prickly pear juice—also gets high marks.

GOING PREMIUM

Lunchtime sandwiches at Bluestem Brasserie in San Francisco are epic successes. “We run a by-hand kitchen, and that plays well with a sandwich menu,” says chef Francis Hogan.

Bluestem—named for the grass favored by cattle ranchers—brings in sustainably raised grass-fed beef and even practices whole-animal cookery, so interesting proteins distinguish the sandwich menu. Sourcing proteins with ties to better-for-you provenance provides both premium and transparency cues. Monday's West Coast Reuben is made with housemade, heritage-breed turkey pastrami. The sauerkraut is made with fennel and fermented in the kitchen.

Likewise, regulars come in specifically on Tuesday for the Crispy Chicken Sandwich. “Everyone's got a crispy chicken sandwich nowadays,” says Hogan. “But ours—the cornmeal and buttermilk chicken—is perfect. It's well-seasoned and dredged and fried to order with a special blend of flours that makes it get crispy and stay crispy. There's the Southern touch of flavorful pimento cheese, old-fashioned housemade bread-and-butter pickles, and the California vibe of a Dutch Crunch roll. I can't remember the last time it didn't sell out.”

The beauty of a sandwich is its potential interplay of elements, its all-in-one-bite build that surprises and delights, even as it comforts.



Flancer's sandwiches feature housemade ingredients and a creative touch. Balsamic-thyme marinated chicken breast melds with mushrooms and melted provolone.

10 STRATEGIES for Modern Sandwich Builds

BY ROB CORLISS, *Cheff/Founder of ATE culinary consultancy based in Nixa, Mo.*

- 1 Take** a bread out of its standard perception/form (say English muffin) and create a new unexpected form (now a thick bread slice).
- 2 Slice** fresh veggies paper-thin and stack or layer—much like sandwich meats are utilized.
- 3 Replace** traditional proteins with unexpected ones in the same classic build.
- 4 Flavorize** sandwich meats, vegetables and/or lettuce by tossing in vinegars or vinaigrettes for clean, bold flavor (and fewer calories).
- 5 Reinvent** condiments by upgrading or subbing a key on-trend ingredient like pickled vegetables or savory jams.
- 6 Integrate** global flavors into classic regional American sandwich builds, like a butter-poached-tamarind lobster roll.
- 7 Change** expectations and purée or thin out spreads to reposition them as craveable broths for sandwich dipping, like a lamb and caramelized onion on ciabatta baguette with chimichurri broth.
- 8 Take** traditional knife-and-fork center-plate menu items and recreate them in a portable sandwich build, like a roasted pork chop sandwich with creamy cider-apple butter and bacon jam on a toasted potato bun.
- 9 Infuse** smoke, charring or other deep, intriguing flavors via intense, dry heat cooking methods, such as wood- or coal-fired ovens, grills or roasting.
- 10 Optimize** snack occasions for sandwich offerings to tap into shifting consumer dining patterns.