

Gourmet

2000s Archive

MICHAEL RUHLMAN

GOING TO THE DOGS

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 2006

When it comes to hot dogs, the real surprise is that some of them have nothing to hide. Going behind the scenes with the country's best makers reveals why

Some people think of hot dogs as having more disgusting parts and unmentionable fillers than a Senate appropriations bill. And, yes, lousy hot dogs are rife in this country. But even the worst wield a kind of patriotic power. And the best are truly remarkable creations.

These days, even high-end chefs are working the dog into their menus. Frank Ruta, chef at Palena, in Washington, D.C., makes his own hot dogs, and the Kobe beef hot dog is so important to Miami Beach's swank Prime 112 that when its sausagemaker threatened to retire and quit producing them, the prospective void sent tremors through the entire operation. "I'm in this business all these years," says chef Mike Sabin, who spent months trying to find an acceptable replacement. "And I'm losing sleep over a hot dog."

What is crucial to understand about this noble branch of the sausage tree is that at its core, the hot dog is what's known in the trade as an emulsified forcemeat. Sounds scary, but it's not. An emulsified forcemeat is a meat-fat-water mixture that has been puréed to within an inch of its life—cut so fast by spinning blades that the water and fat and protein create a uniformly smooth texture. Baloney, for example, is an emulsified meat; salami, in which the meat and fat are distinct, is not. The sticky meat paste is then pumped into a hog casing, twisted into a link, and hot-smoked till it reaches an internal temperature of about 160 degrees, after which it is chilled to its core in icy water. The result is a firm sausage with a dense, smooth, gently spiced interior that can be sliced and eaten cold, poached, sautéed, grilled, broiled, roasted on a stick over an open flame, or reheated on the manifold of your SUV.

The natural casing is critical to the high quality of a hot dog. (I'm staying away from skinless dogs here, which make up the vast majority of hot dogs in the United States, as I find them to be the apogee of mediocrity.) Because the emulsified forcemeat is soft, it needs the counterbalancing crack of skin when teeth meet dog to maximize that juicy explosion of smoky, salty, garlicky flavors. Hot dogs are best grilled till the casing is browned but not split open, then cradled in a steamed bun with minced onion and topped with a dash of good Dijon mustard. For some people this assemblage is worthy of "last meal before you meet your maker" status.

Arguably the best traditional hot dog in the U.S. is made by Vienna Beef, in Chicago, which dates the hot dog's arrival from Vienna to the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. Having grown up on Vienna Beef's emulsified miracles, I decided to visit the source to see the company's inner workings. With surprising candor in an industry famous for its "proprietary" secrets, Vienna Beef opened its doors to its rows of meat cutters and sausage stuffers and discussed the formulas it uses to produce 85,000 pounds of hot dogs every day.

How exactly do they do it? "Quality ingredients and no shortcuts," says Jack Bodman, a senior vice president and son of one of Vienna Beef's owners. "It's very easy to make a lousy hot dog. You can have the right ingredients, but if you don't have the right attitude it won't work." This may help explain why Vienna Beef's natural-casing dog is one of the most expensive hot dogs in the country (\$6 a pound where I buy them; a buck fifty a dog and well worth it).

The Vienna dog is all beef and beef fat—the lean meat of domestically raised bulls (not steers), which, Bodman says, has a higher concentration of protein and a more aggressive beef flavor than does cow meat. The cuts of meat, which range from top round to shank to tenderloin, get ground and mixed with water and salt, a daylong brining process that helps to ready the protein for its binding work.

Fat is fundamental to the hot dog; beef fat is rich and flavorful and highly saturated. They take it from two special cuts: the bone-in brisket (the company makes corned beef and pastrami, as well) and what they call the boneless navel (the belly cut, similar to pork belly, from which we get bacon). This trim, when ground, results in a mixture that is approximately 50 percent fat and 50 percent meat.

These two ingredients—brined bull meat and ground fat—are combined to create a forcemeat, or stuffing, that has about 22 percent fat. It is then channeled into a bowl mixer with the diameter of a jet's turbine, where it's puréed with paprika extract (which is responsible in part for the reddish color), dry mustard, pepper, garlic juice, corn syrup, and the curing salt called sodium nitrite that is important in any smoked sausage for safety reasons and fundamental to the color and flavor of the hot dog.

The giant bowl mixer is then vacuum-sealed to remove air from the meat mixture and lower the temperature change that results from friction. (Temperature is critical to a meat emulsification. If it gets too hot, it can break, the fat separating from the water and protein. While Vienna Beef won't reveal the exact temperature of the emulsification, it's kept almost freezing in the chopper.)

The emulsified forcemeat is then pumped through funnels into natural casings, mechanically twisted into links, and hung on smoking rods. (In contrast, skinless why-bothers are stuffed into cellophane that is removed after smoking and before packaging—notice the faint line down the length of skinless hot dogs; it's from the razor that removes the cellophane.)

Once in the smokehouse—a series of narrow holding chambers in which hickory smoke circulates—the hot dogs hang at about 120 degrees for an hour. This “tempering phase,” Bodman says, helps set up the “protein matrix”—in other words, the slow temperature rise ensures a good bind of the protein, water, and fat. The temperature in the smokehouse then rises to about 180 degrees. When they've reached an internal temperature of 162 degrees, the dogs are quickly chilled.

And there it is, the country's best hot dog.

Others have their own recipes, of course. Frank Ruta, of D.C.'s Palena, stumbled across the formula for his superb dog by chance. He'd been working on a mortadella, the Italian emulsified sausage that is not unlike baloney, and stuffed some leftover forcemeat into hog casings. He served one to a friend who said, “This tastes a lot like a hot dog,” and the next thing he knew, it had become the hit of his café menu. Passing pork, pork liver, veal, and spices such as allspice and nutmeg through a grinder several times and then puréeing it in a food processor, sometimes twice, he has been able to create what Tom Sietsema, restaurant critic for *The Washington Post*, has called “a sausage of distinction.”

Independent sausagemakers once routinely smoked their own dogs, but with industry giants like Oscar Mayer and Hebrew National—as well as the more specialized companies like Vienna Beef and Milwaukee's Klement's Sausage Company—pumping out millions of them, fewer individuals go to the trouble. Empire Market, in College Point, Queens, and Kurowycky Meat Products, in Manhattan, still do, reports writer and hot dog expert Ed Levine. In my hometown of Cleveland, where there is a great sausage culture owing to its German and eastern European populations, there is apparently only one man who makes his own hot dogs.

Norm Heinle, age 61, of The Sausage Shoppe, creates a superb German wiener, as he calls it, from beef and pork. A devoted sausage man since he began working, at age 13, in the store he would come to own, he makes at least 50 pounds of dogs a week, and sells them retail from the premises.

While I bow before such a show of individualism, I also know that the hot dog requires a great deal of work and care. Given that he could just buy Vienna Beef dogs and sell them in his store instead, why does he bother? He paused briefly, and with a smile that was part grimace, he said, “Pride.”

I bought a bundle of these handcrafted hot dogs to grill at home and take the edge off my hot dog craving. But it was a force all its own. I boiled some water, dropped the dog in, covered the pot, and turned off the flame. When the dog had come up to heat in this gentle way, I set it on a cutting board. I sliced. The interior was perfectly smooth. I pressed on it with the knife, and juices flooded to the cut surface. Then the taste: firm texture and subtle flavor of garlic mingling with coriander and a bit of smoke, noticeable but only when you looked for it. Then a handheld bite—crack!

Here truly was great American craftsmanship, handmade and proud.

What, you were expecting a recipe?

Although I grew up in the shadow of Shea Stadium, I've never been to a baseball game. While my friends were doing the seventh-inning stretch and devouring franks, I was inside, glued to Graham Kerr's *Galloping Gourmet*. But I've always been a die-hard hot dog fan.

So when the chance to make a homemade hot dog in the gourmet test kitchens came along, I rejoiced. Sausagemaking is just the right mix of fatty meat cookery and exquisite Play-Doh satisfaction, and I imagined that working with emulsified-meat sausages would be as groovy. (While pasty wet meat may not sound pretty, it makes my mouth water.)

The all-beef hot dog was ruled out immediately after writer Michael Ruhlman kindly warned me that beef fat can be a home cook's worst nightmare. Without the proper industrial equipment, he said, rendered beef fat just doesn't play ball. If you try raw, unrendered fat, he added, you'll be picking out connective tissue and other gnarly bits while still struggling with the unsportsmanlike fat.

After deliberation, we decided to try a beef hot dog using pork fat. I mail-ordered my specialty ingredients: hog and sheep casings, pink salt (a PC name for nitrites), and dextrose. When they arrived, two days later, it was just like Christmas—only with intestines instead of tinsel.

I cleared a wide work area. I soaked and rinsed the casings (always a gory thrill) before chilling and cubing the meat and fat. I then chilled, ground twice, and processed, methodically monitoring the temperature of the fatty eraser-pink mass like a mad scientist.

I'd like to tell you it was a piece of cake and that I'm the new emulsified-meat spokesmodel. But the truth is, I never got to stuff, smoke, poach, grill, or eat.

I failed. I had fat globules where I should have had silk. Perhaps it was the grinder, perhaps it was the fat, perhaps it was the cook. Hot dogs are a much trickier business than I'd imagined.

I spent the next eternity cleaning the grinder, food processor, and meat-spattered counters. The upside—my hands were creamy soft from handling all that fat. The downside—I cannot offer you a great do-it-yourself dog. (I also smelled a bit funky on the train ride home.)

Defeated, I spilled into a local hot dog boutique and ate two dogs loaded with toppings. The only cleanup required was of my mustard-spattered grin. I had accepted that some endeavors are just better left to commercial operations—or fanatics. —*Maggie Ruggiero*

keywords michael ruhlman, maggie ruggiero, meat, beef, pork