

# LINKS

## Get a New Look

Hot dogs and sausages, icons of casual handheld fare, are finding new favor with lovers of foodie upgrades

IT MIGHT SEEM A BIT ODD to call out hot dogs as a trend to watch this year. That's almost like saying that baseball is really catching on in this country. But there has been a revolution right in our own backyard. The hot dog is now haute. And hot dog's fancier friend, sausage? Well, he's smokin' hot, too.

Indeed, eclectic hot dog builds and artisan sausages share crucial flavor DNA. With hot dogs, it's expressed in bold combinations of toppings and condiments. With sausages, craftsmanship and provenance link together to inform well-crafted flavor.

"What's resonating with consumers is the comforting aspect of low-brow fare prepared with precision and an eye towards quality," says Melissa Abbott with consumer research firm Hartman Group. So, perhaps kielbasa is elevated with a vindaloo mayo. Or a hot dog springs from the kids' menu, with add-ons like pico de gallo, avocado, grilled jalapeño and sour cream.

"Chefs can flex their creativity in a number of ways with this familiar form," says Steven Goldstein of The Culinary Edge. "Not only can they find

ways to express their culinary points of view with the condiments and carriers they use, but they can also take liberty with the proteins and seasonings used within the sausage itself."

“

With consumers' tastes still trending toward 'comfortable familiars,' hot dogs and sausages are a natural to get dressed up. They're inexpensive and easy to customize, and play well with accessories.

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KATHY CASEY

competitions to wild food-truck mash-ups, hip late-night bar menus and eclectic lunch menus. They've shaken off

Together, sausages and hot dogs present worlds of opportunity. Price elasticity and menu versatility live in these links. "With a sausage, the grind, the bite, the casings, the seasonings are all important," says Food IQ's Director of Culinary Cari Price. "With a hot dog, it's how you dress it. And as we've seen, consumers are open to anything."

### A DOG BY ANY NAME

And by "anything," we mean one like the Sonoran Hot Dog at Hacienda Mexican Restaurants — a quarter-pound hot dog wrapped in applewood-smoked bacon, topped with charro beans, pico de gallo, spicy pickles, lime mayonnaise and jalapeño-ranch mustard, served on a bolillo roll. Hot dogs have gained culinary "cred," moving from ballparks, Sunday picnics and all-you-can-eat

In Chicago, Chef Bill Kim's Belly Dog was an early adopter of globally inspired upgrades, playing host to gochujang, egg noodles, curry mayonnaise and pickled green papaya.



BELLY SHACK

## Why Now

Sausages and hot dogs offer a new, accepted palette for gourmet street food. Cost is not a factor – consumers are willing to pay for the best hot dog, the best sausage. Burgers paved the way and made this possible, but there is more price elasticity with this trend, especially with sausages, because they can go further than burgers and are versatile across many menu formats and ethnicities.

– MINDY ARMSTRONG

ketchup and mustard, now donning spiked mayonnaises, kimchi relishes and funky mustards. “The hot dog craze is a huge opportunity, as it allows restaurants to integrate a familiar and moderately priced platform to be customized to fit their style,” says consulting chef Todd Downs.

With kimchi salsa, egg noodle, pickled green papaya and lemongrass dressing, Bill Kim’s hot dog was a pioneer in the movement that took hot dogs into culinary

Green chile, cheddar cheese, grilled onions and sauerkraut bring lively updates to Vitaly Paley’s hot dog, served in a Parker House bun at Portland Penny Diner.



JOHN VALLS

“The development of unique sausage sandwiches provides an approachable and logical extension for progressive growth in the upscale burger category. Strategically, operators can differentiate and remain relevant by delivering diverse layers of flavor, while mitigating the rising commodity costs. A contemporary sausage platform is a perfect way to reinvigorate the retro and connect with guests on many levels.”

ROSS KAMENS

consideration. This Belly Dog was a signature item at Chicago's Belly Shack and has helped catapult chef/owner Kim into the national culinary spotlight, exemplifying modern mash-up cuisine.

"It was a weekly special, but the demand was so high, we had to put it on the regular menu," says Kim. "Isn't that the idea — to make things taste so good that customers ask for them?" He suggests applying that formula of yumminess and creativity to any hot dog build.

Kim uses standard hot dogs, but instead of boiling them, he poaches them in canola oil. "When you boil it, you take away the snap and flavor," he says. "Poaching stabilizes the texture, evenly heats the hot dog and keeps the flavor intact."

Street food carts, proud hawkers of hot dogs and sausages, have built a fast track into brick-and-mortar restaurants, paving the way with democratic, edgy, global, fun, inexpensive, casual fare. It's what Sharon Olson of Culinary Visions calls "reversing the flow; where simple foods that are served by street vendors are finding their way into fine dining and lots of unexpected places." And with that flow, opportunity.

"We're seeing a lot of potential here," says Technomic's Darren Tristano. "Food carts are pushing the limits with hot dogs and sausages. We're seeing fusion with Mexican and Asian, especially toppings like pickled radish and spicy flavors."

Growth opportunities for restaurants nestle happily in the bun of familiarity. Tristano suggests that the kids'

## ON THE MENU

# Hot Dogs & Sausages

**BEANS & FRANK** ~ Lard-basted artisanal frankfurters, baked heirloom beans, smoky pork, onion and mustard  
BARK HOT DOGS, BROOKLYN, N.Y.

**OROSHI** ~ Freshly grated daikon with a special soya sauce  
JAPA DOG, NEW YORK

**BRUNCH DOG** ~ Slagel Farms pork loin breakfast sausage, Cobb-smoked bacon, fried egg, maple mayonnaise  
FRANKS 'N DAWGS, CHICAGO

**MANGO-JALAPEÑO SAUSAGE** ~ Chicken and turkey sausage served on freshly baked roll with choice of toppings and mustards  
WURSTKUCHE, SAN FRANCISCO

menu staple of hot dogs can easily upgrade with a few toppings and condiments onto grown-up menus. Or consider miniaturizing them for bar and catering menus. “Appeal upwards from kids to Millennials,” he says.

### SAUSAGE IS KING

“Hot dogs opened the door for other sausages,” says Dave Woolley, executive chef at Red Robin Gourmet Burgers. “There’s no trade down, like from a burger order to a hot dog order. Instead, sausages for us are appetizers.” Red Robin tested a shareable brat dish: three small links of jalapeño-cheddar bratwurst served in mini pretzel buns with pickled giardiniera and country-style Dijon mustard. “Wurst is young and hip,” he says. “It’s all about the beer, with sausages riding beer’s coattails. It’s communal. It’s approachable, and is a spinoff of nose-to-tail butchery.” As evidence, take a look at how many wurst-type restaurants are popping up across the country. They’re casual, they’re cool, and they’re appealing to a broad swath of diners.

Casual is a crucial defining point for sausage’s momentum. In-house charcuterie may have propelled an interest in authentic, artisanal sausages, but where this trend takes off is in the casual sphere of handheld, democratic fare. Case in point: the Über Sausage in Denver, a fast-casual restaurant that caters to sausage lovers. “It’s where guests go for a truly great sausage

“Sausages that have been forgotten, such as bockwurst and cotechino, are being brought back to life. The bun is also a huge player in the equation — witness the Publican Quality Meats bun they get from Chicago hot-dog eatery Franks ‘n Dawgs. Similar to a lobster-roll bun, it is toasted and sweet and is a huge contributor of taste and craveability. It all starts with a good foundation: Both the carrier and the protein element must be awesome on their own — everything else just takes it further over the top.”

TODD DOWNS

Old-world links like bratwurst are seeing a revival in casual concepts and modern brewpubs.



NATIONAL PORK BOARD

## Hot CURRYWURST BY GERRY LUDWIG

Currywurst is classic German street fare that is rapidly increasing in popularity on both coasts. In its most basic form, currywurst is a combination of sliced grilled bratwurst bathed in “chillup” — a tomato condiment flavored with curry powder and served with fries. Further flavor innovation is only limited by the imagination.

At Wechsler’s Currywurst in New York City, diners have a choice of many traditional and non-traditional sausages, including latin chicken, wild boar, lamb sausage and chicken with apricot. Meanwhile, at Authentic German Currywurst in Los Angeles, the offerings include a vegan smoked apple and Mexican chipotle sausage. Hollywood’s Berlin Currywurst offers the ultimate in customizability, featuring chillup in four heat levels along with spice blends to sprinkle atop the finished dish, in flavors such as orange ginger, jambalaya, garlic and peach.

Currywurst is simple to prepare and highly craveable. The dish is ideal for sharing, and has the potential to be a unique menu addition for casual varied-menu concepts.

sandwich, handmade and homemade with naturally raised meats and fresh ingredients, served in a casual, come-as-you-are environment,” says partner Alex Gschwend. Diners here can choose from a list of eclectic sausage sandwich builds, including The Mexico, a Mexican chorizo sausage topped with black bean hummus, cilantro, mango pico de gallo, red and green cabbage, avocado, queso fresco and crema fresca. Or perhaps The Vietnam, a Thai chile-lemongrass pork sausage with Asian slaw (pickled cabbage, jicama and carrots), mint, Thai basil, cilantro, black sesame seeds and sriracha aioli. “Über Sausage is real food for real

While hot dog innovations center around the toppings, momentum in sausages is built around quality, provenance and versatility of application.



JOHNSONVILLE

“There is an unctuous, craveable factor to sausages and hot dogs — between the filling and the toppings we hit all the sweet spots on the palate. Sweet can come from dried fruits like cranberries and cherries; sour from slaws and homemade krauts and relishes; the seasoning of the meat itself will add salty notes; and sour/bitter notes can come from housemade condiments such as pickled mustard seeds and creative ketchups.”

T.J. DELLE DONNE

**How to Work It** If you cannot house make or proprietarily contract your own blends, seek out a quality product with meat, spice and inclusion blends that are distinctive, and the highest possible quality. Exclaim those attributes! Take advantage of the associated trend in artisan or housemade condiments, pickles and relishes, varietal cheeses and other toppings. Don't forget how much appeal the bun can add. Also hot now: varietal corn dogs and boudin using interesting meats and parts, poultry, cheese and seafood.

— ROBIN SCHEMP

people who appreciate tradition yet crave new tastes and the fresher way people eat today,” sums up Gschwend.

The same spirit is at work at Rosamunde Sausage Grill in San Francisco. The popular grilled sausage and craft-beer purveyor offers Chicken Habanero Sausage smoked with tequila and served on a French roll with grilled onions and hot peppers.

Chicago's hip Logan Square neighborhood is soon getting a place where folks can order sausages by the pound to go along with their craft brews. As executive chef/partner, Nathan Sears is the culinary force behind Radler, a Bavarian beer hall with German pub fare. Diners will be able to order sausages like thuringer, currywurst and bratwurst by the pound. “I'm looking for that demographic of early-twenties to mid-thirties,” he says. “They don't necessarily plan their dinner, but they're very socially active. They enjoy their well-crafted cocktails and their good beer. This kind of place is right up their alley.”

At Province in Chicago and Phoenix, chef/owner Randy Zweiban makes sausages in-house, from chicken linguica (traditionally made with pork) to chorizo. The linguica is featured on the bar menu, where he grills the sausage then splits it lengthwise. He serves it on ficelle, a thin baguette, with mustard aioli and pickled vegetables. “It's labor intensive but the food cost is limited,” says Zweiban.

And although in-house charcuterie is not always an option, it does convey value. “The growing demand for whole foods has made it commendable to bring transparency to once ‘questionable’ foods,” says The Culinary Edge's Goldstein. “By grinding sausage in-house, recognizing artisan vendors or otherwise communicating the workmanship and forethought given to sausage dishes, chefs are giving diners permission to feel good about eating what might have once been thought of as ‘mystery’ meat.”

Sausage's inherent artisan cues along with the hot dog's cool-and-casual versatility give chefs and consumers more reasons to fall in love with today's links. ☺

“ This is a trend that has strong legs. Meats in casings have had a following for as far back as anyone knows, since they are delicious and inexpensive to make. This is a spinoff of pig love combined with the emphasis on regional, local and homemade. One opportunity for operators is to explore international sausage ideas and to rediscover some of the old-world varieties that have been forgotten or marginalized. ”

CHRISTOPHER KOETKE