

Last viewed on 04/16/2019

Buffalo, N.Y.'s famous beef on weck sandwich

Larry Olmsted, Special for USA TODAY Published 6:32 a.m. ET Oct. 5, 2017 | Updated 11:02 a.m. ET Oct. 5, 2017



(Photo: Larry Olmsted, for USA TODAY)

The scene: Buffalo, N.Y.'s most famous local specialty is undoubtedly the [hot wing](#) ([/story/travel/columnist/greatamericanbites/2015/09/10/buffalo-hot-wings-anchor-bar/71942942/](#)) from here to almost every corner of the globe. But locals have another heartfelt favorite that has far, though it is certainly deserving of admiration: the "beef on weck" sandwich.

While no one eatery can claim to have created this specialty, and it appears on menus all over the most locals, the undisputed spiritual home of beef on weck in the Buffalo, N.Y., region is Charlie Kitchen, a meat-centric shop that specializes in the sandwich and other sliced meat concoctions. The eatery sits conveniently outside the city's airport, just a mile from the terminal and perfect for a fix when visiting Buffalo, N.Y.

Charlie's has been an institution here since 1914, and now is in the hands of the third generation of owners, all named Charlie Roesch, with middle names. The place is simple — you look at overhead menu boards, order at the counter, which offers a close-up view of the process in an open kitchen immediately behind it. The actual meat slicing is done by hand on cutting boards right in front of you. You move around the counter to the single register, then sit in Formica booths at simple tables topped with floral tablecloths, or alternatively at bar stool counter seating. It's a combination of a fast food eatery and food market, and there are half a dozen smaller Charlie's Express locations in the region, including the city's NFL team, the Bills, play in suburban Orchard Park, N.Y. There is also a seasonal stand dispensing just Beef on Weck sandwich (the flagship offers much more) at Coca-Cola Field, home of the city's famously popular minor league baseball team, the Bisons.

Charlie's is not the only place you can try beef on weck, not by a long shot. Another local favorite is Bar Bill, a neighborhood tavern in suburban Aurora, N.Y. (where toy company Fisher-Price, now owned by Mattel, has been based since its founding in 1930), which routinely wins various newspaper and magazine Best of Buffalo awards for its wings. The tavern sits on East Aurora's quaint main street, is cash only and typically features heavy, worn wood tables and chairs with a pub feel.

While overlooked by most out of town visitors, the specialty is also heavily featured on the sandwich menu at the world-famous Anchor Bar. [Buffalo wing was invented](#) ([/story/travel/columnist/greatamericanbites/2017/09/28/taste-american-food-inventions-at-the-source/70134400](#)) pilgrimage spot for road food fans. It's a longtime fixture at Schwabl's, a German restaurant that has been here for more than a century and the sandwich's roots in German cuisine fit the spot. It is on just about every bar menu around town, and iconic enough that there have been variations on the classic: at The Ward, a large and very popular brewpub cum sports bar (complete with outdoor seating and indoor live roller derby) on the river, the dish is transformed into a signature hot dip appetizer. A visit to Buffalo is not complete until you have tried it.

Reason to visit: Beef on Weck sandwich

The food: Long a beer brewing town, Buffalo had a good sized German immigrant population, and the story goes that sometime around 1850 a vendor sought to expand his repertoire beyond just pretzels. He borrowed the classic seasoning of pretzel salt from his main product, incorporated caraway seeds used in another culturally popular baked good, rye bread, and put both these strongly flavored ingredients on top of a Kaiser roll. The creation was known as a kimmelweck roll, and has since been shortened to just weck. The creator sliced it in half, filled it with sliced roast beef and a dollop of spicy horseradish, and voila, the beef on weck was born. While some spots around town today serve the city's most famous sandwich on kaiser rolls or plain rolls, this bun is indispensable to the traditional version.

A classic example of America's melting pot and inventive nature at work, apparently the sandwich has no equivalent or roots in actual Germany. Charlie's current owner, Charlie W. Roesch, is the semi-official ambassador of beef on weck and has done demonstrations on TV and at food fairs around the world, spreading the gospel of the city's second most famous dish. "I went to Dusseldorf and demonstrated it and the Germans like I was nuts," he recalls.

At Charlie's, the whole roast beef is cooked slowly in the oven at 250°F until it reaches an internal temperature of 100°F, then the heat is lowered and it cooks even more slowly for another 10-12 hours, because as Charlie says, "tenderization happens around 104 degrees." The entire process calls "cook and hold," takes 18 hours and results in sliced meat that is extremely tender, amazingly so, but still quite rare and red, the color of roast beef, with a wonderful mouth feel. Here they slice the roll, hand cut the meat in front of you to order — the motto is "carving beef on weck" — dip the top half of the roll in au jus sauce and you add the horseradish yourself to taste, and "that's a beef on weck."

The salty roll is a good contrast to the delicious but plain beef, and the horseradish adds noticeable kick, though it is not as hot as you might like the heat of spicy mustard, adding a nice glow. Charlie's has sourced the rolls from a local bakery for many years. The salt makes the rolls last just a couple of hours requiring multiple batch deliveries throughout the day. It's a hearty sandwich, and you can also get a slider but the same roll with slightly less meat, for a dollar less. The typical side here is fries, which are a little thicker than I like, but crunchy and nicely crisp, along with excellent pickles. Charlie's also specializes in roast turkey sandwiches and grilled sausages of all sorts, including Italian, Polish and chorizo.

The acclaimed version at Bar Bill packs on even more sliced beef, it's really big and meaty, but the roll isn't as significant or bready — at Charlie's the roll is an integral part of the sandwich, here it is more like an accessory to the tasty beef.

The city's most interesting take is the beef on weck dip at The Ward, which chops up the roast beef and mixes it with horseradish, then adds Monterey jack and cream cheese, and bakes it all until bubbling in a ceramic dish. It is served with pretzel crostini for dipping, and it's a great rendition, perfect for a place that brews its own beer and needs something to go with that. Other modern takes on the sandwich around the city use different breads or add a cheese, not on the original, and one unique take uses horseradish cheddar to tie into the sandwich's history.

While it is popular at bars and hence with beer — a good match — and Charlie's the Butcher serves local favorite Genesee ale, the classic Loganberry fruit drink, aka Bug Juice, another distinctive regional specialty. A Kool Aid-like cross between blackberry and raspberry flavor, was the favored libation at the now defunct Crystal Beach amusement park on the shores of Lake Erie, and while the park is gone, the name Crystal Beach is the most popular of several brands of Loganberry widely available in the region.

Pilgrimage-worthy?: Yes, this is one of the most distinctive and enduring of America's regional sandwiches and enjoys a high level of popularity in the Buffalo region.

Rating: Yum! (Scale: Blah, OK, Mmmm, Yum!, OMG!)

Price: \$ (\$ cheap, \$\$ moderate, \$\$\$ expensive)

Details: Charlie the Butcher's Kitchen, 1065 Wehrle Drive, Buffalo, NY; 716-633-8330; charliethebutcher.com (<https://www.charliethebutcher.com>)

Larry Olmsted has been writing about food and travel for more than 15 years. An avid eater and cook, he has attended cooking classes in a barbecue contest and once dined with Julia Child. Follow him on Twitter, @TravelFoodGuy, and if there's a unique American eatery you think you should visit, send him an e-mail at travel@usatoday.com. Some of the venues reviewed by this column provided complimentary services.

Read or Share this story: <https://usat.ly/2kpTDcX>