

The Dog Days of Summer

For connoisseurs of hot dogs, there's no better destination than Huntington, West Virginia.

A visitor to Huntington, West Virginia, might be forgiven for exclaiming "hot diggity dog" when paying a call on this city of 50,000, which sprawls several miles along the banks of the Ohio River. As many as eight emporiums in town, some with multiple locations, focus their business mainly on hot-dog sales, while a dozen others offer them as sideline items.

How did such a frenzy for frankfurters come to be? Back in 1932, Stewarts Original Hot Dogs was the first vendor to lead the charge. Current fourth-generation owner John Mandt Jr. surmises that wieners caught on because they offered a cheap dining-out experience at a time when money was scarce. Whatever the reason, hot dogs continued to establish themselves over subsequent decades as a local culinary sensation when other family-owned businesses offering wieners as their menu-headlining wares opened their doors. Mandt doesn't mind. "The best compliment to a successful business is having others emulate you," he says.

Nowadays, diners can choose from establishments with walk-up windows or drive-ins where car hops deliver your order to your vehicle. Frostop Drive-In, for example, is easy to spot with its giant revolving mug of root beer on the roof. For a dine-in experience, travel along the Ohio River to a true hot dog destination: Hillbilly Hot Dogs, with its jumble of junkyard treasures, both rustic and rusty, surrounding it. There's even an outhouse, and *of course*, there's a still (neither is operable). Try downing Hillbilly's famous Homewrecker, a three-and-a-half-pound, 15-inch



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all-beef weenie, the choice of Guy Fieri of the Food Network when he visited.

You won't detect differences in the hot dogs themselves at the various vendors, however, because they all purchase their wieners from the same wholesaler. Instead, it's through the toppings that the dogs distinguish themselves, especially the distinctive chili sauce with closely guarded secret ingredients unique to each establishment. Locals swear they could be blindfolded and still detect whose sauce is whose. Other topping options include onions, bacon, barbecue sauce, jalapeños, relish or kraut, nacho cheese and sour cream. Alternately, go simple with cheese and the local sweet and creamy coleslaw.

All this hot-dog heritage can be celebrated at the West Virginia Hot Dog Festival on the last Saturday in July, this year on July 28. The full day of entertainment, music and contests benefits the local Hoops Family Children's Hospital. Activities include a Bun Run, a Buns on Bikes bicycle ride, a Pooch Parade and a Dog Costume Contest. Especially popular are the Root Beer Chugging and Hot Dog Eating contests (a physician stands in readiness to perform the Heimlich maneuver). The grand finale is always the Wiener Dog Race when a hundred dachshunds dash for the finish line—or not. New this year will be a motorcycle stunt show.

But no matter the time of year, you'll be astonished at the local passion for hot dogs in Huntington. "I know folks who came to Stewarts as kids in the back seat of a car," says Mandt. "And now they're coming to us as adults with their own kids in the back seat."

—Rich Warren



PHOTO BY RICH WARREN