

CAB Adds to Philly Sandwich Popularity

by Janet Mayer

Philadelphia — home of William Penn, Ben Franklin, Betsy Ross, the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall.

Philadelphia is also the birthplace of the “Philly” Cheese Steak Sandwich.

For almost 60 years, Philadelphians have been enjoying the sandwiches that are served in hundreds of restaurants, pizzerias and snack bars located in neighborhoods where cheese steak greatness is a matter of pride.

The cheese steak sandwich has infinite variations but the basic sandwich is constructed from a crisp or soft crusted, long Italian roll that has been sliced horizontally and heaped with lots of delicious, tender, thinly sliced beef. The beef is prepared by grilling it to browned perfection and then topping with cheese for the last few minutes of cooking. Fried onions top the melted cheese and the whole concoction can be topped with an endless variety of vegetables and sauces according to the customer’s preference.

The restaurant that originated the sandwich, Pat’s King of Steaks, is in the middle of downtown Philadelphia at Reading Terminal Market. Open daily except Sundays, the renovated 19th century indoor farmers’ market features 80 stalls selling everything from double-yolk eggs to jewelry.

The commotion and noise and a mixture of smells greet shoppers before they enter the vast red brick structure.

Inside, stalls containing a cornucopia of appealing food and merchandise are spread as far as the eye can see. Baked goods, fresh and smoked meats, fresh seafood, fresh produce, coffee, deli items and all other manner of food products

one of the end walls of the massive building. Long before the stand is in sight, however, the tantalizing aroma of grilled steak, onions, sweet peppers and mushrooms draws customers like a magnet. The hiss of water hitting the

hot grill followed by great billows of steam pluming high into the air intensifies the smell. The grill is located behind a glass enclosure, enabling potential customers to observe the masses of thin sliced steaks and vegetables cooking.

Working the grill, with turner in hand, stands the orchestrator of the symphony of smells, Herb Olivieri. Attired in a red apron inscribed with the name Olivieri Steaks and the logo of the operation, a crown, Olivieri touts the merits of his sandwiches to anyone who pauses to watch his deft movements.

“This is Certified Angus Beef,” Olivieri tells a young couple who pause to watch. “That means this is the best beef you can eat; it is always tender.”

A large sign inside the glass next to the grill explains that the steak sandwiches are prepared without oil or grease. The customers are sold, they go to the order counter to place their orders. Now it is decision time. Do they want

American, provolone or cheese whiz? Mushrooms, sweet or hot peppers or onions? Lettuce and tomatoes? Pizza or hot sauce? How about criss-cross fries, fried in cholesterol-free, unsaturated-fat



Herb Olivieri, president of Pat's King of Steaks, uses only Certified Angus Beef for his famous sandwiches.



The famous Philly cheese steak sandwich with the works.

are attractively displayed under bright overhead fluorescent lights. Sprinkled throughout the building are small restaurant stalls serving ready-to-eat foods.

Pat’s King of Steaks is located along

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peanut oil to go with the sandwich? Orders are placed the couple moves off to the other end to wait for their sandwiches.

In spite of the fact that Olivieri appears to cook steaks for his livelihood, he is actually a practicing attorney. He combines a business and legal career with a real-world knowledge of the food industry.

"I entered the family steak sandwich business at the age of 14. My father was the inventor of the Philadelphia Cheese Steak Sandwich. I started at the bottom, mopping the floor and cutting vegetables. I didn't graduate to making steak sandwiches until I was 18," he recalls with a smile.

Herb serves as president of Pat's Steaks, with restaurants at the Reading Terminal Market, the University of Pennsylvania and in south Philadelphia. The operation in the southern area of the city is operated by Olivieri's cousin. The University of Pennsylvania operation is managed by Richard Olivieri, Herb's 26-year-old son, and Herb oversees the operation at Reading Terminal Market.

"I practice law five days a week, but every Saturday I work here in the Terminal," Herb says. "It is fun. My father was out on the floor of his restaurant every day. I like to have person-to-person contact with our customers. I especially like to poll them on the quality of our sandwiches."

The "Philly" was invented in 1932 by Olivieri's father, Pat, who operated a hot-dog stand. "It was really a quirk how this all came about," Olivieri recalls. "My father became tired of eating hot dogs and fish cakes; so he sent his younger brother to the butchers to get some thin slices of beef, which he cooked with some sweet peppers on the grill at his hot-dog stand. A passing cab driver smelled the tempting aroma of the grilling beef, stopped and tried to buy the sandwich. My father explained that he had prepared the sandwich for his own meal. 'If you don't sell it to me Pat, I won't buy anything,' the cab driver replied. Since this was the height of the depression and money was tight, my father sold the cabby the sandwich for 10 cents. I don't think he gave much thought to the incident."

When the cab driver later returned with friends, all requested the grilled steak sandwiches. The Philadelphia Steak Sandwich was born and Pat's

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Olivieri says the sandwich has changed a lot through the years mainly because the public has demanded that everything be low fat, yet tender and flavorful. That is how they came to use Certified Angus Beef. The operation uses a special method of searing the flavor into the meat without the addition of oil or fat. A layer of water is poured onto the grill and the raw steaks are immediately put on top. It quickly became apparent that the meat would have to be a high grade; of not, it would become tough when cooked by this method.

The quest for a meat that was consistently flavorful and tender, however, was extensive. Olivieri enlisted the aid of Gene Gagliardi, owner of Designer Foods, and the originator of "Steak-Ums" sandwich steaks. They experimented with various types of imported and domestic meats, finding that most were a fairly good grade, but that it was not consistent for taste and uniformity.

"We tried the ribeyes that were imported cow meat," Gagliardi says. "They were alright, but not what Herb was looking for. I always felt some of the best tasting beef comes from the chuck because it has good marbling. Most people by-pass it because of the fat, but I decided to give it a try."

"I started around the first rib and took the eye back to between the sixth and seventh rib. I cut the fat out around the fifth rib and squared up the whole thing. What I came up with was a nice roll of chuck that weighs about 12 pounds," explains Gagliardi. "After the beef was cut, we froze it, then tempered it to 28 degrees before slicing into one-eighth inch thick steaks."

By using the chuck in this manner, Olivieri was assured the product was tender, flavorful and also unique.

Once the quest for the right cut of meat was ended, Olivieri and Gagliardi set about the task of finding a supplier. They went to see Jim Convoy, president of the George Wells Meat Company in Philadelphia. The Wells company is a Certified Angus Beef distributor with about 1,600 CAB accounts.

Convoy says they asked him to find a cut of meat that would be of a higher quality, decently low in fat, but still be tender if it were cooked without oil or fat. "I thought using the chuck was a great idea, and figured Certified Angus Beef would be the answer. I suggested Herb give it a try," Convoy recalls. "We worked with Herb for a couple of months, and he found he really liked using CAB chuck because of the quality. We have been selling to him ever since. In fact, he has signed a contract to exclusively use CAB. We sell about 800 pounds of the CAB chuck rolls to Olivieri's restaurants weekly. I've eaten their sandwiches, and can safely say, there are none better anywhere."

Olivieri says making the change to CAB was the best choice he could have made. "I feel it is actually as close to Prime as you can get," he says. "We are probably the only steak sandwich establishment that makes our sandwiches out of CAB chuck, which makes us unique. When we finally introduced it to our customers on a regular basis, their reaction was overwhelming. We not only attracted new people, but we got a lot more repeat customers."

A large sign by the entrance and logos prominently displayed let people know they are serving Certified Angus Beef. "I like to tell people about it because I want to awaken them to the fact they are getting a better grade of meat than in an ordinary steakhouse," Herb says. "I want customers to know that every sandwich will be as good as the ones they had here before. I can say this with confidence because as far as we are concerned, CAB is the best."

The opinion of the many customers at Olivieri's restaurant who were eating the sandwiches was unanimous: "They are excellent!"

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