

ISSUE EIGHT | SUMMER 2009

# meatpaper



# Top Dog

## The rise and rise of the artisan hot dog

by HEATHER SMITH photos by JULIO DUFFOO

IT WAS LIKE BEING AT A PUNK SHOW, only everyone was in fancy shoes. They were clustered together in a giant pink amoeba — reaching and reaching for something, as though a crowd-surfing rock star were moving toward them. The thing that stood out, though, was that the rock star was a platter of corn dogs.

I believe in coming prepared to events featuring hors d'oeuvres, and thus I was wearing my 4-inch platform cowboy boots. They gave me a critical few millimeters' advantage — enough to reach over and across the crowd, grab a skewer of breaded meat product, and run.

I held it up and considered it. It looked like a small beige torpedo, or like a deep-fried dry-erase marker. It had been years since I had eaten a corn dog. California had turned me into the sort of person who ate whole foods. Leaves. Nuts. Berries. Wild boar prosciutto. Traumatic memories of grade-school cookouts filled my head. A dim memory of being screamed and screamed at for petting a caterpillar instead of trying to catch a fly ball began to surface, like a corpse at the opening of a crime show. I hesitated.

I felt a hand on my arm. A wild-eyed woman in career separates was looking at my corn dog like it was her lost childhood on a stick.

"Are you going to eat that?" she said querulously.

It was now or never. I took a bite.

\* \* \*

If you flew over America at the tail end of the 19th century with a pair of meat-sensitive goggles, you would see a mosaic of regional sausage-making practices stretching from coast to coast. Individual farmers and local slaughterhouses took the less marketable parts of the animals they killed, ground them into a fine or not-so-fine paste, smoked them, and ate them. But when the slaughterhouse industry began to consolidate in Chicago in the 1920s, the same forces that were pushing

to develop a standardized way to cut up an animal and sell it found themselves dreaming of one nationalized wiener. The wiener of the American childhood. A wiener so famous that it would have its own song.

I am sharing a hot dog with the publicist for a chef who grew up in one of the last strongholds of regional, non-standardized wienerdom left in America: New York. We are at Absinthe, an upscale San Francisco restaurant popular with patrons of the nearby opera. Which is possibly why the hot dog is \$12. It also happens to be a highly non-standardized wiener: Kobe beef, pork shoulder, and bacon, served with homemade mustard. The publicist and I agree that it is a very good hot dog.

*If you flew over America at the tail end of the 19th century with a pair of meat-sensitive goggles, you would see a mosaic of regional sausage-making practices stretching from coast to coast.*

Ask Jamie Lauren, the chef, why hot dogs are suddenly so popular, and she'll give you a blank stare. There is never a second when hot dogs are not famous to Jamie Lauren.

A trip to New York is a chance to smuggle back a stockpile from Papaya King — a tropical juice and frankfurter stand that has fed Lauren through all the stages of her life. Which gets me to thinking about how rare it is for a high-end chef to professionally cook anything that resembles the food they grew up on. Spending two days grinding and smoking a hot dog is about as close as Lauren is ever likely to get.

\* \* \*

Larry Bain is standing out behind the Let's Be Frank hot dog cart in the San Francisco fog when someone makes that remark about asshole. You know the one. "This is all lips and anus, right?" a woman says cheerfully, already