

CURTIS' FAMOUS WEINERS
ORIGINAL SINCE 1918

Coney Island &
CURTI
ORIGINAL Coney
ISLAND

WEIN

★ *Curtis'*
Coney Island
Famous
WEINERS



The Long Arm of the Dog

*Sauce, sweats, and common sense
The secret to the success of Curtis'
It's the house the weiner built.
Really, No kidding.*

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In 1918, when the first dog rolled off the arm of an employee a sensation was born and today, Curtis' Weiners at 35 North Liberty Street is mentioned in the same breath with churches, historical sites, and scenic vistas as a "must" stop while in Cumberland.

Who could have imagined that when a Cumberland confectionary store turned a new "fad" in foods into their primary reason for being, that it would not only lead to success but would make the restaurant an unofficial landmark for its host city?

"We have people who have heard about us and get off the Interstate just to find us," said Gino Giatras, the present owner of Curtis' and the third generation in his family to run the business. "People who grew up here will come home to visit and say they have to stop here while they are in town or it doesn't feel like they have been home."

A welcoming hands-on owner, Gino greets each customer personally and then proudly positions himself behind the counter to prepare the order.

What's in it?

Don't even ask. Just eat and enjoy. You won't get the ingredients out of anybody. The sauce used on the dogs is a closely guarded secret. The recipe is kept under lock and key and known only to two living people — Gino and his father, Louis George, who ran the business from 1969 until 2000 when he handed the keys to the weiner kingdom and the formula to his son.

Louis, however, remains an integral part of the family business. When it's not Gino making the sauce in the morning, it's Louis. And long before the restaurant opens for the day, so no roving eyes can take note.

"It's the same recipe we have been making since 1918 when we sold the first one," Gino said with a laugh. It's the first of many infectious laughs he will expel in any typical conversation had with him. "The sauce recipe came from a chef in Texas who invented it and then traveled the country selling it. This chef would change the recipe at each location so each person buying the recipe didn't get the same one."

They had it first

Interestingly enough, the same traveling Texan sold a variation to a restaurant in Coney Island, New York. There, the sauce was patented and cleverly marketed by amusement park vendors and the Big Apple eventually was credited for the sauce. In actuality, Western Maryland had its version long before the Statue of Liberty smelled the sauce.

Patents and notoriety never interested George Giatris though. He had come to the United States from Sparta for the promise of a better life at the turn of the century. He opened a confectionary store and a nut shop and operated a successful business until a new trend in foods was introduced — the weiner — a small tubular shaped delicacy served on a bun. The hamburger had already made its debut and the American culinary public was hungry for the "next big thing." Not one to pass up an opportunity, Giatris began to serve the concoction at his shop and then later fatefully made the decision to buy that special topping recipe from a smooth talking Confederate entrepreneur.

Imagine how taken aback the regulars to George's Confectionary were when he hinted at his intentions to cut back on bon-bons and go full steam ahead into the weiner business. To indulge the public and avoid an outcry, George opened two restaurants — one that continued to serve nuts and chocolates while at the same time introducing the new sandwich, and another that served just the sandwich and a cold mug of beer for the older crowd. Those two stores remained opened under two names until 2000.

"We had two locations for a long time because people had to be able to separate the two businesses in their head," said Gino. "They got used to one restaurant serving one thing and the other doing the other thing."

By the time the second restaurant closed and the Curtis' original location had expanded, it was too late. People were hooked on the sauce and the Curtis wiener was already engrained in the subconscious of anyone passing through or living in the Maryland mountains.

Sweating to the oldies

So beloved and familiar is the Curtis hot dog to Western Marylanders that most of the restaurant's client base doesn't even call the business and its product by its given name. While the name on the plate glass window may say "Curtis' Weiners" the majority of customers simply call them "Coney Island" or even "Sweats."

"The term sweats comes from the days of being in the original building on Baltimore Street," Gino explained. He loves to tell this story and tells it on a regular basis for those who venture to ask it. "The kitchen would get very very hot. They wore a handkerchief around the neck and a sleeveless T-shirt. That was the uniform. It was hot and they were busy. There was only a fan and a large window and they would sweat when they made them and that's where the term came from."

Gino said he knows how far back a customer's history with the shop reaches because of how they order. "If they call them sweats, I know they are the old timers, the people who have been coming in for years and years."

Weiner eaters from all over

"We actually have hot dog connoisseurs tell us they have tried and can't get these wieners anywhere else," Gino said. "We get everybody from business owners to kids. We get our competitors. We have one customer who says she's a vegetarian except for the one day a year and then she eats our wieners. We have multi-millionaires to people who are on minimum wage."

The business has taken calls and filled orders in St. Louis and the Panama Canal. A nun in Westminster stops by the restaurant on her travels here and loads up on them to take back to the convent. A customer who lives out west packs them into a cooler and then takes the cooler on the airplane ride home as her carry-on luggage.

"You can get 'em, freeze 'em and ship 'em," Gino said.

Up the arm

There is, however, a secret to making them which has been handed down since the first weiner rested in a bun. The trick to mass production is to line the hot dogs up the arm and then slather on the sauce at once.

Gino mastered the skill early. At the tender age of eight he made his father proud by balancing a grand total of seven prepared dogs up his forearm, stretching from his wrist to his shoulder.

"There's a guy who stops in from Arkansas who says he does it just to see me make them that way."

In fact, new employees must master the art of preparation in a course Gino likes to call "Weiner 101." Each lesson is a step. First, balancing the bun on the arm, then

placing the weiner inside and holding it steady and then finally, applying the sauce.

It's become a fine art

Gino claims he can prepare 15 dogs in this fashion but he's quick to note he is not the record holder. That record belongs to Bud Aman. "Good ol' Bud," Gino recalled and laughed heartily. Have you figured out yet Gino is a man who loves to laugh? "He could get 18 of 'em up his arm."



Gino and Manager Nikki Dorsey, both put in a hard day's work, but still take time to enjoy the customers.

The secret to success


Last fall, children involved in a YMCA after school program were asked to paint a mural depicting what they believed to be Allegany County landmarks. The mural was later exhibited in the Saville Gallery of the Allegany Arts Council, and there among the Crayola etchings of Dan's Mountain, Rocky Gap State Park, Lover's Leap and the C&O Canal, was a small building and on that small building were big red letters reading "Coney Island Hot Dogs."

"We wouldn't be here if people didn't keep coming back," Gino said. "We treat people like family. A lot of people say they put customers first but for us, the customer is all we've got."

And the community rallies around them too

"Working here is like having a family of in-laws," Gino said. "I know if the chips were down, the customers would be there for us too."

Lest a person think this simple formula of mastering the fine art of hot dog sauce is nothing to bark at, consider this: The business has put one Giatras son through law school, a second through medical school and afforded another—the one who runs the shop—a masters degree in business.

"My Dad always said if you don't love doing something, don't do it," Gino said. "This is what I'm built for. I'm built for laughing, working, and carrying on. I love it. I can't imagine doing anything else and being this happy." 

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