

TRAVEL

Sandwiches that are worth a trip and worth the bread

Larry Olmsted Special to USA TODAY

America loves sandwiches. We grow up with them, take them to school and work for lunch, make them at home and buy them on the road. There are countless huge national chains devoted to the category – Subway has more locations than McDonald’s and Burger King combined. Of course, you could argue that burgers and wraps are just sub-categories of sandwiches – just like subs themselves – but for our purposes we will stick with things other than ground meat patties that go between slices, rolls or other kinds of risen breads. Today we are talking serious sandwiches. ■ Like most other types of foods we love, some sandwiches transcend geography, while others are heavily regionalized. Either way, the best in class are worth traveling for. But today we are skipping your basic roast beef or BLT and taking a look at sandwiches that are associated with particular places. To keep it manageable we are going to exclude the entire category of barbecue sandwiches (pulled pork, for example.) because that’s for another day, as well as fried chicken (too many good ones) and open-faced variants (such as Louisville’s decadent Hot Brown). That still leaves way too many to choose from, but these are five of the most mouthwatering, delicious, regional sandwich specialties we’ve tasted in the past several years, with recommendations where to enjoy them at their best.

Muffuletta, Central Grocery, New Orleans

We’ve tried a ton of amazing sandwiches over the years, but the muffuletta reigns supreme – it is just impossibly good. You can find them all over Louisiana and increasingly in other parts of the country, though it’s still a regional standard. Central Grocery not only makes the best one, it invented it.

The muffuletta is a variation on the “Italian,” a medley of cold cuts including ham, mortadella, salami, pepperoni and cappicola, plus Swiss and provolone cheeses. The two big differences that make it a muffuletta are the roll and the relish.

Central Grocery’s third-generation owner Frank Tusa told us, “In Sicily, muffuletta is actually the name of the roll, like Kaiser.” But the meat, cheese and relish combination inside is a strictly American invention, created by Tusa’s Italian immigrant grandparents.

The roll is a flat, round loaf about 10 inches in diameter, and the sandwiches are cut in quarters and sold by the half or whole. The most important ingredient is the relish, variations of which are sometimes called giardiniera. Central Grocery’s “Italian Olive Salad” is a long-time secret family recipe, with whole green olives and pieces of celery, cauliflower, carrots, onions, hot and sweet peppers, capers, olive oil, vinegar and spices, plus lots of garlic.

Central Grocery’s muffulettas are big: A quarter is enough for many, and a half is as big as most other large sandwiches. As Tusa explained, “We use premium ingredients, no shortcuts, the bread is locally handmade, and it’s a good value. There’s a lot of bad fast food out there; this is good fast food.

“We sell out every day, so we must be doing something right.” So come early and expect to wait in line.

■ **Honorable mention:** Another historic eatery in the Big Easy, the Napoleon House, is famous for their unique take on the muffuletta, serving it warm.

Smoked meat, Schwartz’s Deli, Montreal

In the U.S., Jewish deli sandwiches are personified by pastrami. In Montreal, Jewish immigrants created a parallel cured beef called Montreal-style smoked meat. Schwartz’s smoked meat is made by marinating raw brisket in a liquid spice mixture, then slow smoking in an electric smoker, then steaming. The differences are subtle, but when



Bob’s lobster roll is just claw and knuckle meat with mayo, nothing added.

PHOTOS BY LARRY OLMSTED FOR USA TODAY



John’s offers a choice of three cheeses on the pork sandwich.



The muffuletta is served warm at the Napoleon House in New Orleans.



To eat the tenderloin like a regular sandwich, cut it in half and stack it.



A large smoked meat plate at Schwartz’s comes with rye bread.

nostic gem.

The sandwich is made with hot, wet, thinly sliced roast pork on a hoagie roll, with the standard options of cheese (typically provolone) and greens (a choice of sauteed broccoli rabe or spinach). This is easily the best and most famous use of broccoli rabe in the American sandwich kingdom. All the ingredients are wet and sloppy, and when combined to order on a roll there is no neat way to eat an Italian roast pork sandwich. Some places offer optional sweet or hot peppers.

I had these all over town, and my personal favorite was John’s Roast Pork. Dating to 1930, John’s is a third-generation family operation that claims to have invented the Italian roast pork sandwich, and it won a James Beard Award as an American Classic in 2006. The pork is roasted on the premises, rubbed with a secret recipe of fresh herbs. They offer an unusual choice of American, mild, or sharp provolone cheeses. This is the classic take on the delicious sandwich.

■ **Honorable mention:** While most Philly sandwich places make it all, DiNic’s is an Italian specialist, serving just the roast pork, a variant called Italian-style pulled pork, and meatball and Italian sausage sandwiches. DiNic’s is super-easy access – it’s a busy four-sided stand in the middle of the famous Reading Terminal Market.

Lobster roll, Bob’s Clam Hut, Kittery and Portland, Maine

The simpler a dish is, the more important the quality of ingredients and attention to detail needed to make it shine. Nowhere is this exemplified more than in the New England lobster roll, a classic that has surged in popularity in recent years. A solid and authentic version is available chain-wide from Luke’s Lobster (more than 40 locations), while a not-so-good version surfaces seasonally at McDonald’s. Fans argue about butter versus mayo, real fans abhor any non-seasoning ingredients, but it should be 100 percent North Atlantic lobster meat with butter, mayo or both, possibly celery salt and/or paprika, and pretty much nothing else.

I’ve had a lot of lobster rolls and the best I’ve found is at Bob’s Clam Hut. You’d think it was a modern tourist trap given its location in the middle of outlet malls, but when Bob’s opened in 1956 in Kittery, it was the only roadside seafood choice on a long stretch of southern Maine coastline.

side by side, smoked meat is darker and redder, pastrami pinker. Smoked meat is also leaner. If you like pastrami, you'll like this, and Schwartz's has been the place to try it since 1928.

You can get a smoked meat sandwich or a smoked meat plate with rye bread on the side and make your own. Like barbecue brisket in Texas often is (same cut), smoked meat is offered as a choice of lean or fatty slices, and the difference is noticeable. Because it's drier and flakier than pastrami, I recommend going with the fatty, which is moister and adds a richer flavor.

Tenderloin, Plump's Last Shot, Indianapolis

The pork tenderloin sandwich is simply called the tenderloin in the heart of pork country, which in this case means a swath of the Midwest stretching from Indiana through Iowa. In this region you will find the sandwich pretty much everywhere and there is no end of argu-

ments over the pros and cons of each. I've tried a lot, all at the suggestion of local food-loving friends, and to date, Plump's Last Shot has been the best – and most colorful.

The classic Gene Hackman movie "Hoosiers" is a true story, based on the Cinderella season of a high school basketball team from rural Indiana that goes on to win the state championship. Bobby Plump has been subject of hero worship ever since, and this is his basketball-themed bar and grill in Indianapolis' Broad Ripple neighborhood.

Back to the sandwich: The tenderloin is a breaded and fried schnitzel-like pork cutlet on a roll. At Plump's, they start with generous pieces, and as the man himself said, "We cut ours thicker and pound it less and it has plenty of meat." It is a shockingly big sandwich on a hamburger-style bun, so the tenderloin overhangs the bread. Plump's "Hoosier Tenderloin" has been repeatedly rated the best in the city by Indian-

apolis Monthly readers.

■ **Honorable mention:** Des Moines is another hotbed of the sandwich, and the legendary local favorite is Smitty's Tenderloin. Smitty's uses only whole slices and offers two sizes, with the king dwarfing the roll to the point of ridiculousness. The smaller queen isn't much smaller. A big difference is that Smitty's has a dizzying array of condiments, including mustard, ketchup, onions, pickles, tomatoes, hot peppers, chili and cheese and even taco meat.

Italian Roast Pork, John's Roast Pork, Philadelphia

The City of Brotherly Love's most famous sandwich is easily the namesake "Philly cheesesteak," but the city should be much prouder of the Italian roast pork. The locals are, and almost everyone I talked to rolled their eyes at the tourist-beloved cheesesteak and expressed their preference for this gastro-

Many lobster roll gurus have told me that the secret to success is to only use only knuckle and claw meat, and that's what they do at Bob's. "Tails are preferred for just eating lobster, but in the roll it is a bit too chewy," said general manager Tim Beal. Otherwise there is just a little mayo, no paprika, chives or celery, in an excellent and generously buttered New England-style bun perfectly toasted for warm, crunchy contrast. It is a stunningly awesome lobster roll that won Editor's Choice at New York's vaunted annual Lobster Rumble against the biggest names in the field.

■ **Honorable mention:** Kennebunkport's Clam Shack is both beloved (its recipes made it into Barbara Bush's cookbook) and controversial, because they use a round hamburger bun. It holds more meat; each sandwich contains all the meat from a freshly shelled 1-pound Maine lobster.

Larry Olmsted has been writing about food and travel for more than 15 years.