



“I believe that
all anyone really
wants in this life is
**to sit in peace and
eat a sandwich.**”

- Tina Fey as Liz Lemon, 30 Rock

The Rise of the Sustainable Sandwich

Slow Food Principles Take On the Lowly Lunchtime Staple

BY MOLLY WATSON PHOTOS BY BEN TREMPER

Full disclosure: This writer has no deep love of the sandwich. Peanut butter and honey on grainy whole wheat bread haunted my lunchbox growing up and I accepted them as a necessary evil. Parisian ham-and-butter baguettes, New York pastrami on rye, Chicago Italian beef, and New Orleans po' boys showed me there was no heinousness inherent in sandwiches, but they still always struck me as a food of convenience and nothing I ever craved. Yet even I, sandwich skeptic that I am, couldn't help but notice that the summer of 2008 was a turning point for San Francisco sandwiches, like 14th-century Florence to the oncoming Renaissance, if you will. In quick succession Boccalone and then The Sentinel opened.

Boccalone, headed by Chris Cosentino and Mark Pastore,

Left: The Sentinel's wild mushroom, chard, and dried tomato mayo sandwich, with havarti cheese on an onion seed sprinkled bun.

offers "tasty salted pig parts" by the sausage, chunk, slice, or—most conveniently—placed between two slices of bread. It may grace the giant hall of the Ferry Plaza and bill itself as a salumeria, but Boccalone is a deli in spirit if not in name.

Dennis Leary, of Canteen fame, saw the need for a great sandwich place downtown and created The Sentinel. "Everyone told me Canteen was too small and I had to go bigger," Leary explains. "So, being a difficult child, I opened something even smaller."

They are the yin and yang of sandwich spots—Boccalone bright and open and catering to the specialty Ferry Plaza crowd while The Sentinel hides in a dark corner downtown churning out sandwiches for hungry office workers. But the minute Boccalone layered mortadella, cotto, and nduja between two slices of grilled Acme sourdough and The Sentinel surrounded its perfectly piquant egg salad with soft wheat, the bar for sandwich shops in the Bay Area hiked up several notches.



THE SENTINEL SF
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Sandwich slinger Dennis Leary opened The Sentinel in a former cigar stand and the place has been smoking hot ever since.

The defining characteristic of the mini-explosion in San Francisco of sandwich shops is that they serve **kick-ass portable bread-encased deliciousness.**

Sure, plenty of people had created scads of delicious sandwiches well before 2008, but these creations were served at restaurants and cafés, not at grab ‘n’ go sandwich shops. Single counters geared for quick takeout and open only for lunch still sourced almost universally from Sysco, served French’s mustard in packets, and didn’t vary the menu much. The great sandwiches that were available for such quick pickup (Out the Door’s offerings come to mind) were but small parts of larger menus; they weren’t coming from old-school sandwich counters.

Both Boccalone and The Sentinel switch out their menus seasonally and offer daily specials. More important than the beyond-roast-turkey aspect of their sandwich menus, however, are the ingredients that go into them. Cooking happens at these sandwich shops. Boccalone obviously cures its own meats (that’s the point of the place, after all), but also makes the relishes and spreads that go on the sandwiches. The Sentinel roasts, poaches, or cures its meats and vegetables, whips up the condiments in-house, and even bakes about 80% of the bread it uses. “The cheffy stuff comes in by making everything taste real,” says Leary. “Make your own mayonnaise, add some salt. Give it taste.”



Walk this way: The Pal's Take Away vegetarian option is a chunky enticement for hard-core carnivores.

Since the one-two punch of Boccalone and The Sentinel, a smattering of notable lunch-only, sandwich-centered, geared for takeout sandwich shops have opened up in San Francisco. What's more, they tend to be in full compliance with the sustainable, local, organic credo that is *de rigueur* in San Francisco. Meats are from humanely raised animals, eggs descend from happily scampering birds, veggies grow on local farms. Meats are cured in-house. Relishes, sauces, and pickles are house-made. All the things fine-dining establishments used to crow about are being doled out in bag lunches.

After all, once people get used to good ingredients, why wouldn't they look for them in their daily sandwich?

More than the trickle-down effect is at work here, though. Sandwiches fit the spirit—both DIY and frugal—of these trying economic times. All things being relative, sandwich shops are inexpensive to open, inexpensive to run and inexpensive to frequent. On the operating side the spaces are small, demand is somewhat predictable and ingredients don't break the bank. (The exception to this last point would be the makings for the foie gras and duck prosciutto sandwich—yours for \$15—at The Naked Lunch.) As Leary puts it, "I'm not going to get burned by high costs. I can do it during the day.

There's a market because people need lunch downtown. I can go and build it myself and figure it out. A mistake won't be huge."

On the consumer side a sandwich is a pretty cheap way to eat out and a quick way to fill up. The sandwich is the king of lunch for a reason.

And in these tough economic times what says "It's all going to be OK" more than the humble sandwich?

Yet these sandwiches aren't so humble. Or, at least, they shouldn't be. The defining characteristic of the mini-explosion in San Francisco of sandwich shops is that they serve kick-ass portable bread-encased deliciousness.

Take Kitchenette, a lunch-only spot that set the food world a-buzzing when it started operating out of a loading dock in Dogpatch on St. Patrick's Day 2009 by serving up house-cured corned beef sandwiches. While soups, stews, and tagines are regulars on the daily changing menu, "right out of the starting gate the sandwich was the main attraction," according to Executive Chef Douglas Monsalud. "The lunches that we've got the most feedback on are all sandwiches. The sandwiches are always the thing that captures the public's imagination."



David Knopp and Jeff Mason don't have a store front but they are definitely on the map for sandwich lovers.

Crowd favorites include an Indian fried chicken sandwich and a beef and pork polpetta sandwich with amatriciana sauce (that's a meatball sub to you and me). No sandwich has garnered more feedback, though, than the Philly cheesesteak.

"Tons of people told us how to do it," says Monsalud, who hails from outside Philadelphia. "People get really passionate about their sandwiches. They're so populist – they're the food of the people. The vernacular and the tradition are really strong. It's a food that transcends feeding you or nourishing you, it's an icon for a community. It ties people together through a common way of doing it. It's a strong piece of culinary work."

It's a strong piece of work that takes some work. The key to a fine sandwich that also meets the needs of the takeout crowd isn't simply throwing tasty stuff between bread. "We had some missteps in the early days," says Monsalud. "Pastrami on sliced rye, for example, is great. But you walk away and eat it an hour later and it's pretty soggy. They make sandwich rolls for a reason. We've learned how intricate a sandwich can be—things beyond flavor need to be considered."

If The Sentinel is the quintessential downtown sandwich shop that's all business but serves up sandwiches that are all

cheffed up, and Kitchenette has the ultimate "let's put on a show" attitude, then Pal's Takeaway is the neighborhood deli counter, minus the Boar's Head cold cuts and Klaussen pickles. Jeff Mason, Pal's founder, has always loved sandwiches. "For a long time I had this idea to open a organic, hand-made, market-driven sandwich shop," he says, "but I couldn't find a place to do it."

His friends at Dynamo Donuts on 24th Street knew just the place—an unused deli counter in the back of Tony's Market on the corner of 24th and Hampshire.

Now Mason and partner David Knopp conjure up at least three sandwiches and a salad (and sometimes a soup) Monday through Friday for a clientele of SF General Hospital workers, local shopkeepers, stroller-wielding parents, and neighborhood devotees. The house-smoked roast beef sandwich, whether served with gorgonzola or house-made pickles, is always a stand-out, but the more inventive creations like roasted sardine on green onion slab with pickled egg, salsa verde, and radish really sing. As at The Sentinel, there is always a vegetarian option (squash, a little miti crema cheese, and escarole, for example).

Despite its offerings of five-spice roasted pork with house-

made kim chi and a bahn mi made with Laotian sausage, there is a comforting bit of Jewish deli in the air at Pal's. The layers of meat are a bit thicker than at other joints, about once a month Pal's cures its own pastrami and corned beef using American Kobe beef, and the single dessert offering is as often as not chocolate babka.

Kitchenette and Pal's both have second locations in the works, in the Mission and the East Bay, respectively, set to open soon. Leary is looking to open another lunch spot downtown. It may not be quite so sandwich-centered, but even as he claims never to eat his own food (like most chefs, he's been busy tasting it for hours) he also notes after all day at the sandwich shop and all night at Canteen, "I try and get my girlfriend to make me a grilled cheese sandwich." aSF

One imagines he wants to sit and eat it in peace.

Molly Watson never liked the gloppy cheese pizza served every Friday at her Minneapolis grade school but begged for school lunch whenever deep-fried bean burritos were on the menu. She now writes *The Dinner Files* (thedinnerfiles.com) and *Local Foods*.



All have menus that are updated on their websites: Boccalone and The Sentinel seasonally with some daily specials; Pal's Takeaway and Kitchenette daily. Pal's also tweets their daily menus more often than not.

Boccalone

Ferry Plaza Building
www.boccalone.com/
Salumeria

Kitchenette

958 Illinois
www.kitchenettesf.com/

Naked Lunch

504 Broadway
www.nakedlunchsf.com/
@nakedlunchsf

Pal's Takeaway

2751 24th St at Hampshire
(inside Tony's Market)
palstakeaway.com
@palstakeaway

The Sentinel

37 New Montgomery
at Stevenson Alley
www.thesentinelssf.com/

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