



Sandwich Challenge

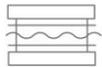
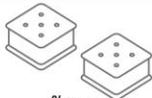
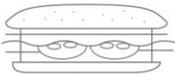
Foodies and philosophers weigh in on the sandwich debate.

SRQ MAGAZINE | JULY 2017

BY PHIL LEDERER

IN AT THE TABLE

Deep under the Earth, in a cavern lit by fire, the high priest makes his final preparations. Perched atop the ancient scaffolding, he peers down at his towering culinary creation—a sandwich fit for the gods and made for a king, with more than 40 layers of exotic meats, cheeses, fruits, spreads and breads stacked 15 feet into the air. More than a month’s labor. His fingers tremble as he lays the final garnish. The gathered crowds hold their breath and release it in a collective wail as the tower first sways, then buckles and finally collapses, the last piece of bread landing with a mocking plop atop the ruined mess. The priest bows his head and a voice calls from the back—Danny, *from accounting*—“Does it still count as a sandwich?”

SANDWICH ALIGNMENT CHART	INGREDIENT PURIST Traditional toppings only	INGREDIENT NEUTRAL Toppings non-traditional but savory	INGREDIENT REBEL Anything goes
STRUCTURAL PURIST Toppings between two pieces of bread	 Bacon Lettuce and Tomato	 French Fries and Gravy	 S'mores
STRUCTURAL NEUTRAL Toppings between food in some way	 Hoagie	 Hot Dog	 Ice Cream Taco
STRUCTURAL REBEL Food in food	 Turkey Wrap	 Burrito	 Pop Tarts

While he may have terrible timing, poor tact and little understanding of the number ‘4,’ Danny (from *accounting*) also has a point. What began as a simple battle between open-faced and what every other normal person calls a sandwich has blossomed into a full-fledged battle for the soul of the thing and no one can quite say what does, or doesn’t, make a sandwich a sandwich. Is it the structure? The ingredients? All anyone really knows is where it all began, with John Montagu, the Earl of Sandwich, who reportedly played at the games table for twenty-four hours straight, eating nothing but cold roast beef pressed between two pieces of bread. And that may not even be true.

But to embark upon conversation without agreed upon definitions “is to invite misunderstandings,” says Dr. Aron Edidin, professor of philosophy at New College of Florida. And at a time when tempers and appetites rise in tandem, clarity can be paramount to public safety and one man’s sandwich can be another’s last straw. “We need to have some common sense of the words that we’re using,” he says, “and usually those don’t have anything to do with the definitions in the dictionary.” From the Platonic forms to Aristotle’s categories and all the way to Wittgenstein’s amusement at humanity’s collective inability to define a game (Seriously. Try it.), philosophers have tangled with the shortfalls of shared language. But maybe this is a question for the chefs.



“There are no rules,” says Chef Samantha Slechta, a culinary instructor at Keiser University. Growing up in a foodie family, her folks owned three restaurants on the eastern coast of Florida and Slechta worked in each of them, cutting her teeth on the chopping block before heading off for formal training. In her mind, the question of what makes a sandwich is largely one of function—namely to be a sturdy, no-mess food for eating on the go. “As long as you can put it in your hand and eat it,” Slechta says, it’s a sandwich. She wouldn’t even argue too much with calling a Pop Tart a sandwich, though she’d recommend opting for homemade. But what of the overstuffed and oversized? The gourmet “sandwiches” requiring knife and fork for civilized consumption? “It depends on how good it is,” Slechta laughs. “If it’s delicious, people don’t mind if it’s messy—it would just be a messy sandwich. There’s nothing you can’t do.”

Enter Chip Beman, a.k.a. Judge Bread, owner of Main Bar Sandwich Shop and staunch sandwich traditionalist. “In the end,” he says, “it’s meat between two buns.” He’ll allow additional ingredients—granted they’re on the savory end—and by buns he generally means bread, but that’s where the wiggle room ends. An ice cream sandwich made with waffles? “That’s dessert,” he says. What about the Pop Tart? “That’s not bread,” he says, and crusts and crackers don’t count. Burritos and wraps don’t pass the test either and pita sandwiches are more like a salad. Hot dogs are right out. “Hotdogs ain’t meat,” Beman explains. “A hotdog is a tube of death.” The sandwich, on the other hand, is something “tried and true,” he says, and if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. “You have to appreciate their creativity,” he says of other chefs, “but maybe I’m a traditionalist.”



Chef Steve Phelps, the driving force behind the serial innovators over at Indigenous, is anything but traditional. “A sandwich is anything compressed between two of the same substances or items,” he declares—and he means it. If the structure is maintained, then the ingredients just don’t really matter. It could be turkey and whole wheat or ice cream and waffles—it doesn’t even necessarily have to be food. “If you put something between two pieces of wood and you eat it,” says Phelps, “I would call that a wood sandwich.” At Indigenous, they sell miniature pork belly sandwiches on biscuits, and staff dinners often consist of biscuit sandwiches of all sorts. He remembers as a child, when simple cheese sandwiches were the norm, sometimes his mother would run out of bread and invert the operation, giving young Phelps a reverse sandwich of bread between two pieces of cheese. “Everybody’s mom did it a million different ways,” says Phelps. “That could’ve been some of my culinary innovation beginning at an early age.”