



GODMOTHER



SWEET CAROLINE



TUNA MELT

# KNOCKOUT MELTS: FINDING THE TREASURE BETWEEN BREAD SLICES

BY SUNIL MALAPATI

A great sandwich is a happy accident.

Legend has it that the cribbage-addicted Earl of Sandwich asked his staff to give him meat between slices of bread to prevent meat juices dripping down and smearing his all-important cards. While he may have lent his name to the food, it is unlikely he invented the modern sandwich. It does make for a good story.

The next happy accident was when Parisian cafés started melting cheese between the bread slices, adding ham and calling it a croque monsieur. A perfect on-the-go food for workers and a wonderful symphony of tastes and textures, how can we not love a good grilled cheese sandwich?

Knockout Melts, finding new ways of melting cheese between slices, certainly counts as a happy accident. Teri Link and Kathy Conway, friends for more than two decades and now business and life partners, started a food truck way back in 2013. Food trucks were just getting popular across the nation (Food TV had started a food truck summer reality competition a couple of years ago). Teri and Kathy were not ready to commit to a restaurant and felt a food truck would be a good way to dip their toes into the market. They put a lot of items they liked on the menu but soon found that their melts were the most popular and decided they were just going to focus on the melts. Their signature melt with shredded beef pot roast and pepper jack cheese, now named the Bombshell, still remains at the top of their menu. That name, the Bombshell, is a nod to their food truck roots. The food truck and later, their first venue in the Roshek building, were both named American Bombshell, a name they changed to Knockout Melts when they opened their second venue on Pennsylvania Ave. earlier this year. (Apparently, Hooters owns a trademark on Bombshells.)

Knockout Melts grew organically as Teri and Kathy grew along with their business. They learnt and adapted as the food truck became a kiosk in the Roshek Building lobby. The flexibility of working two to three times a week gave way to a steady lunch crowd five times a week, and the menu became more standardized. They streamlined the process even more as they opened their new location, with more room and a bright clean open space. Teri and Kathy were kind enough to give

me a tour of the new space, and I was impressed by the efficiencies they have built into the system. The model is closer to a fast casual chain, and the orders get filled fairly quickly. I observed lunch at both venues and the turn-around time at Roshek is longer, both due to crowd size and the cramped space setup. One aspect that bears commenting upon is the attitude of the staff: friendly, engaging, and smiling, they really seem to care for their customers (and know the regulars well) and make the wait time worthwhile.

So, let us get to the melts themselves. A great melt delivers a crispy outside where the bread is toasted just right and ooey gooey melty inside, delivering multiple taste sensations in one bite. Consider the Knockout with a spinach spread, shredded chicken, spiced tomato slices, and provolone cheese. I got it on their signature Panini bread. The outside was buttered and sprinkled with garlic salt before the inside was assembled and the whole thing grilled to perfection. The richness of the spinach spread and mild provolone cheese was balanced by the tomatoes with the chicken adding the right dose of meatiness. I could have used more tomatoes, but then I do like more acid in my food! The Other Woman, with just tomatoes and mozzarella, is a particular delight for someone like me. You can switch the panini bread for a multigrain bread (good texture) or a gluten-free bread. Their version of gluten-free bread from Udi's has a decent texture with good cell structure and tastes right, something hard to find without gluten. It does not have the same elasticity that wheat bread has but holds up well.

The Farmer's Daughter is one of my favorites. The melt is filled with shredded chicken, crispy bacon, slices of granny smith apples, cheddar and pepper jack cheese, and a great raspberry chipotle sauce to tie it all together. The sharp acidity of granny smith apples along with their juicy texture are perfectly balanced by the meats and cheese, but it is the raspberry chipotle sauce that puts it over the top. The sauce also contains blackberries, adding a unique depth.

Speaking of well-executed sauces, try the Mississippi Queen, one of the original recipes to make the transition from the food truck to the current venues. The melt itself has shredded chicken, bacon, and cheddar cheese

and comes with a side of sriracha-ranch sauce, the sauce again adding a perfect acidic note to the sandwich.

The names of the melt sandwiches seem curiously strange and enticing, and I had to ask Teri and Kathy about that. They wanted names that indicated feminine strength, with a hint of mystery. Even a simple grilled cheese got the name Plain Jane. A good pun is always welcome. The croque monsieur became Queen of the Hammed! When they decide to introduce a new sandwich to their regular menu after it has been tested out (see below), they have a competition on Facebook to name it. So, their version of the Cuban with ham, pulled pork, pickles, yellow mustard, and Swiss cheese ended up with the alluring name Havana Hellcat.

One big change from a food truck model to a fast casual model was to allow customers to build their own melts, choosing their own bread, protein, cheese, and toppings. Regular customers apparently know a couple of beauties: the Tricky BLT and Hell Fire, neither of which are on the menu but can be ordered. The Tricky BLT has the unctuous garlic aioli punching up the BLT flavor. The Hell Fire is designed to set your mouth on fire with super spicy Slap Ya Mama Cajun seasoning, jalapeños, buffalo sauce, and pepper jack cheese. Shredded chicken and cheddar provide a hint of relief!

If a great sandwich is a happy accident, a smart business built on sandwiches will seek out the next great accident by testing out multiple ideas and picking the ones that survive and thrive. When I visited last week, I tried a bonkers-sounding I love Guac and Roll with cheddar, bacon, guacamole, and Doritos. I tried it without bacon, and it was interesting to say the least. The bacon was necessary to add the salty meaty component to balance the fatty richness of cheddar and guac and the tangy crunch of Doritos.

A great sandwich needs good supporting players. After all, grilled cheese and tomato soup are comfort food heaven. Knockout Melts does well in this arena. In addition to the usual array of chips available at most delis, there is the soup of the day, dill potato salad, macaroni salad, cheesy hashbrowns, and garden salad. There is only one soup of the day in summer and two soups in winter. The soups are made on-site and rotate daily. The



MISSISSIPPI QUEEN

dill potato salad and the macaroni salad had one thing in common: they were dressed lightly without overwhelming the ingredients or the sandwiches. In this, they acted as true supporting players! It is not often you can find a mayonaisse cream dressing that allows the crisp celery and green onions to shine through as well as the red potatoes and dill.

If most sandwich places scrimp on desserts or just manage to throw in a cookie or two, it is with good reason. It is hard to do a good dessert sandwich, let alone a melt. Knockout melts has come up with a dazzling trip of dessert melts that I cannot recommend enough. The clear star is Smores with mini-marshmallows, milk chocolate chips, and graham cracker crumbs all melted between cinnamon bread slices and sprinkled with crystal sugar and chocolate shavings. It is sinfully delicious, if a little on the sweeter side, and this is coming from someone who doesn't care for chocolate. I would kill for a dark chocolate

version! The Pineapple Express with cream cheese, pineapple, and mini-marshmallows is a great mixture of sweetness and acidity but is a little messy with the bread not strong enough to hold the pineapple pieces (a similar issue with the Hula Girl sandwich). The Strawberry Cheesecake is beautifully balanced with the tart juiciness of strawberries and the creamy sweetness of the cheesecake filling working with the crispy toasted bread sprinkled with powdered sugar. The sweet dessert melts are also quite cheap, just \$2 for a half-melt, for that perfect meal-ender! Now, Teri and Kathy need to start a new Facebook contest to name these beauties.

It should not be surprising that Dubuquers have fallen hard for these sandwich melts. After all, we put bread between two pieces of bread and call it a turkey dressing sandwich! Here is wishing Teri and Kathy more happy accidents, where they dream up of new treasures to melt between two slices of bread! ■



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# RAISE THE ROOF

BY MATT BOOTH

**mattitude**  
A common sense approach to a positive attitude

The Amish often get a bad rap and people have a hard time understanding their lifestyle. They trace their heritage back hundreds of years, and yet, despite all the time that has passed and the many changes that have taken place in society, they still live and work much as their forefathers did. The King family from Lancaster, PA bought the Booth family farm (where my dad grew up) in Cuba City, WI around 20 years ago, and I've gotten to know them a bit over the years. I don't claim to know or understand them very well; I do find their sense of community incredible!

Have you ever seen an Amish Barn Raising? If not, check out the movie *Witness* with Harrison Ford. A barn-raising is indeed a community endeavor. At daybreak, the buggies arrive at the farm where the barn is to be built. Then, an experienced Amish carpenter is put in charge, and men are assigned to various areas of work. Meanwhile the women are preparing a delicious noon meal, sometimes served outdoors. There is always prayer before a meal is served. The children play games and are available to run errands. But they also have a most exciting day as spectators at a truly amazing project of brotherly love—building a barn.

Raising a barn in a day? I have a hard time calling my neighbor to help me move a sofa. The barn raising fulfills a practical need and serves to tie the Amish community together, reinforcing Amish society through a very visible expression of the principle of mutual aid. The Amish are committed to helping one another and put their Christian beliefs into practice when putting up a barn. Barn raisings are synonymous with Amish life and tap into the social capital and goodwill in the community. The Amish know they may need the community's help themselves one day.

As we sit as kings and queens in our modern day castles where moats and drawbridges have been replaced by fences and garage doors, it is easy to wonder how they can survive in their supposedly backward ways. Their families and their farms are their top priorities, second only to God. The Amish people are very devout in their faith. This simple, peaceful lifestyle seems more and more attractive with each new technology.

In comparison to our rat race society, the simpler, community-centered way of life holds a special fascination. The Amish's strong sense of community are good examples for us. Neighbors freely give of their time and their skills to help one another. It is their sense of community that draws me to them. This basic need for community is in our hearts and souls. In a time where most people reading this barely know their next door neighbors, we long for community. The type of community that comes together and raises a barn. The type of community that says "hey, I got your back!" The type of community you can't get from a screen. ■

## CHECK YOUR ATTITUDE

Check yourself before you wreck yourself! A few fantastic ways to improve your attitude and the attitudes of the people around you are to say please and thank you. I sound like I'm talking to our seven-year-old. It seems simple, but more and more people are seriously lacking in the manners department. Do some research yourself today and you will realize how often people do not use please and thank you. This is a simple but powerful reminder to use your manners and get that "attitude of gratitude" in your heart. If you Check Your Attitude on a regular basis, you won't have to worry about Covering Your Butt!

**MATT BOOTH**

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"AFTER KNOCKING OVER AND SPILLING HIS BROTHER'S SODA, GRAHAM SAID, 'DAD, I'M SOOOO LUCKY. IF I WOULD HAVE HIT THAT GLASS ANY HARDER, IT WOULD HAVE FELL OFF THE TABLE AND BROKE THAT ALL OVER THE FLOOR!'"



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