

## OBSESSIONS

BY JORDAN HRUSKA

# SANDWICH LOVE IN THE MORNING

*Breakfast in bread.*



Bragging rights for the origin of the breakfast sandwich get as heated as the 1776 Battle of Brooklyn.

Perhaps it was invented that August morning when a redcoat stole an egg from a colonist's farm along Newtown Creek and cracked it onto a scorched piece of metal under which a flame was tended carefully so its smoke didn't alert Continental troops. Hastily fried, this egg foreshadowed the creek's state today: oily, debris-strewn and hard around the edges. But placed between slices of bread, it was revolutionary indeed.

Admittedly this is my own tall tale, a borough-proud egg-and-cheese answer to Johnny Appleseed. True, some breakfast historians site an egg sandwich of Royal British Military origin, while other argue its roots lie

achieve a tug-free bite, as you don't want to wrestle with the gummy pull of untoasted bread. Similarly, bacon must be crispy, ensuring each bite is a clean cut. A little mayo plays an adhesive role, while its richness tones down the vinegary char (some invoke ketchup for this purpose and others amp up the acid with Tabasco). As for the cheese, the Colby-cheddar mixture in American cheese melts better than standard cheddar. Egg prep is a personal choice, but an egg fried soft is often a hard sell.

Longshoremen and bridge builders of yore knew that the best breakfasts are of plebian proportions, and the hardhats at Uncle Paulie's Restaurant (408 Greenpoint Avenue) agree. At this piecemeal diner



in sliced hard-boiled-egg Scandinavian sandwiches. But I can't imagine a birthplace more fitting than Brooklyn, where such a natural resource could have been mined from under the BQE.

Well, if we didn't discover it, we've certainly polished that greasy gem, and today everyone from mechanics to moms, everywhere from bodegas to bistros, polishes off plenty still.

Let's sit down at Best Deli (986 Atlantic Avenue, Crown Heights) to review breakfast-sandwich basics: their bacon, egg and cheese (\$3.25) is a perfect primer. Whether bagel, bread or roll, toasting is imperative to

**Which 'wich is which:** Defonte's Virginia Ham and Egg Sandwich (left) and Egg's Country Ham Biscuit (above). Opposite: Break the fast with Roebbling Tea Room's Bacon, Egg and Gruyere (left) and Uncle Paulie's Sausage Egg and Cheese (right).

made from canvas flaps atop a wood deck, the sausage, egg and cheese (\$3.75) is the business's true foundation. I sit down in a deck chair next to the space heater and open my roll to see Uncle Paulie's thick beef links, the stately red of a factory brick, held together with mortar of American cheese and soft scrambled egg. The sausage snaps when I bite

down and the day breaks.

Several blocks away, the steak-stacked El Ranchero at Franklin Corner Store (210 Franklin Street) has long corralled the hangovers of Greenpoint. On a Saturday morning, I find myself in the pre-breakfast purgatory of their tiny dining room alongside puffy-eyed 20-some-things. Filmmaker David Lynch stares from an autographed photo for his “Franklin Corner boys,” while the grill cook shouts “saws ake cheese!” and “bake ake cheese!” The El Ranchero sandwich translates the Midwestern steak-and-egg breakfast into a Philadelphia cheese steak with the brotherly love of thin-shaved beef, mayo and melted American. This mighty combo gels between the slices of a toasted bagel and oozes enough protein and grease to soak up last night’s drinks and accompany



a therapeutic morning-after beer.

Perched on the edge of nowhere and the BQE, Defonte’s Sandwich Shop (379 Columbia Street, Red Hook) has been serving hefty Italian breakfast sandwiches for over 50 years. The small counter is packed with blue-collar regulars joking with the grill cooks, so I take my Virginia ham, potato, egg and cheese sandwich outside, sit on a damp half wall near the highway and fold back the wax paper to reveal my steamy sub. I’ve gone for broke with a foot-long toasted sesame hero (\$8.50), the size of two standard breakfast sandwiches, because the extra square inches are necessary to grip and shuttle the potato-and-egg-scramble into my mouth. Unlike typical home fries, Defonte’s spuds are prepared according to a secret recipe (oven-baked, says an inside source; I suspect there’s oregano involved). Atop this fluffy egg-potato combo sits a little mozzarella and several paper-thin slices of salty Virginia ham, warped by the hot goodness below.

Some of the borough’s tonier restaurants offer pedigreed interpretations and I wonder what the guys at Defonte’s or Uncle Paulie’s would say if they sat down to Sunday brunch only to find their weekday morning staple on the menu. Take the “Hungry Bear” (\$9.95) at Enid’s (560

Manhattan Avenue, Greenpoint)—a sausage, egg and cheese biscuit slathered with white gravy—or the bacon, egg and Gruyère on whole-grain bun (\$6) at Roebing Tea Room (153 Roebing Street, Williamsburg).

Or at Egg (135 North 5th Street, Williamsburg), where the country ham biscuit (\$7) is a Southern institution that, despite lacking any eponymous egg, is as representative of regional breakfast-sandwich traditions as the English muffin constructions of New England or the pork roll with egg and cheese in New Jersey. George Weld, chef and owner of Egg, has been hooked on morning sammies since his childhood in Virginia. Today he eschews the prized pork of his home state and serves nitrate-free 16-month-cured meat from Col. Bill Newsom’s Ham in



Kentucky atop the craggy, velvety, scone-like biscuit. He references his mother’s fondness for figs with a dollop of fig jam, which pulls out the subtle sugar of the ham’s cure and balances the tartness of the melted Grafton cheddar. The entire affair sits like a proud little tower and finds its way to my stomach before I decide whether to use my fork and knife.

Further studies in stylishness could only lead me to Park Slope. Cocotte’s (337 5th Avenue, Park Slope) Monte Cristo (\$11) stands alone as an exercise in breakfast maximalism. I leave the beaming young families and cozy French provincial décor when I take my brioche beast to go and sit across the street in J.J. Byrne Park. Open-faced and unabashed, this sandwich flashes a car dealer’s grin with its generous slice of ham, a fried egg, Swiss cheese and raspberry jam. Like its French forebearers, the buttery brioche is egg-battered and lightly fried, porous enough to accept the salty-sweet grease and jam runoff as I take it for a stroll to the nearby Brooklyn landmark, the Old Stone House. I reflect on its role as a shelter in the Battle of Brooklyn and consider the diehard patriot mantra, “The Declaration of Independence was signed in ink in Philadelphia, and signed in blood in Brooklyn.”

Blood thick with grease and yolk. □