

Roadfood, 10th Edition: An Eater's Guide to More Than 1,000 of the Best Local Hot Spots and Hidden Gems Across America (Roadfood: The Coast-To-Coast Guide to the Best Barbecue Join)

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A cornucopia for road warriors and armchair epicures alike, Roadfood is a road map to some of the tastiest treasures in the United States.

First published in 1977, the original Roadfood became an instant classic. James Beard said, "This is a book that you should carry with you, no matter where you are going in these United States. It's a treasure house of information." The 40th anniversary edition of Roadfood includes 1,000 of America's best local eateries along highways and back roads, with nearly 200 new listings, as well as a brand new design.

Filled with enticing alternatives for chain-weary-travelers, Roadfood provides descriptions of and directions to (complete with regional maps) the best lobster shacks on the East Coast; the ultimate barbecue joints down South; the most indulgent steak houses in the Midwest; and dozens of top-notch diners, hotdog stands, ice-cream parlors, and uniquely regional finds in between. Each entry delves into the folkways of a restaurant's locale as well as the dining experience itself, and each is written in the Sterns' entertaining and colorful style.

"The bible for motorists seeking mouthwatering barbecue or homemade pie." - USA Today

JANE and MICHAEL STERN are the authors of more than twenty books about America. Their Roadfood column for Gourmet has won three James Beard Awards. Their Roadfood segments appear regularly on the Television Food Network, and their website, www.roadfood.com, was selected 2001 site of the year by Yahoo. Also regular contributors to NPR's "The Splendid Table," the Sterns live in West Redding, Connecticut.

Abbott's Lobster In the Rough

117 Pearl St. / 860-536-7719

Noank, CT/LD / May-Labor Day, then weekends through mid-October / \$\$

Abbott's is renowned for chowder and lobsters, both of which have defined seafood excellence in eastern Connecticut for decades. The chowder is a style unique to southern New England shores: steel-gray, briny, full of clam flavor, plenty of clam meat, and a handful of potatoes; and the lobsters are steamed to perfection. But beyond these glories, Abbott's posted menu suggests a whole range of other fine seafood items: steamers, mussels, clams and/or oysters on the half-shell, hot lobster rolls that are nothing but buttered pink meat on a bun, lobster salad rolls (cool, bound with mayonnaise), crab rolls (hot or cold), and shrimp salad rolls. There is even broiled chicken for the lost soul who finds himself at this great seafood restaurant craving poultry.

Abbott's is a very pretty place to dine al fresco. Seating is at bare wooden tables (although civilized sorts bring their own tablecloths as well as their own wine); the air is filled with the salt smell of shore breezes, and background music is provided by gulls screeching in the sky (but kept away from the tables by invisible netting).

Chez Lenard

Main St./ No phone

Ridgefield, CT/ LD / \$

Chez Lenard of Ridgefield has no address and no phone number. It is a sidewalk cart on Main Street with no tables or chairs. Accommodations for dining include sidewalk standing room and Ballard Park across the street. Some car customers pull to the curb, toot their horn, and get their meal delivered to the window without ever leaving the driver's seat.

Despite the lack of amenities, Chez Lenard is indubitably high tone. When the original "Lenard," a Manhattan rat-race refugee, parked his cart here in 1978, he established an urbane ambience with a French accent that has thrived under subsequent proprietors' incumbency. Citizens of Ridgefield have come to treasure the happy incongruity of a man in a billowy chef's toque exclaiming "oo-la-la!" as he slathers on hot relish, or "merci beaucoup" when making change. The blackboard menu lists such exotic-sounding delights as "Le Hot Dog Choucroute Alsacienne" (with sauerkraut and mustard), "Le Hot Dog Excelsior Veneziano" (with Italian peppers and sauteed onions), and "Le Hot Dog Facon Mexicaine" (a chili dog).

The dogs themselves, plucked with tongs from a hot water bath in the cart, are magnifiques: kosher all-beef franks with a taut casing and firm insides, long enough to stick out from both ends of the bun, and buxom enough that a pair of "Supremes" (with mustard, relish, ketchup, and chopped onions) with a can of Dr. Brown's soda make an immensely satisfying meal.

Chez Lenard is open year-round, every day except Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas or when the weather is extremely awful. "I am pitted in the winter," says proprietor Chad Cohen. "But I am envied in the summer. For me, this is always a great job because everyone I meet is happy. Who isn't happy when they eat a hot dog?"

Doogie's

2525 Berlin Turnpike / 860-666-1944

Newington, CT / LD / \$

Doogie's boasts that it is "home of the 2-foot hot dog," but in our experience the hot dogs are significantly longer than that. Closer to thirty inches. While one of them, in its yard-long bun, looks like a party sandwich for a table of eaters, especially if it is loaded with sauerkraut, chili, onions, bacon, cheese, etc., you will see some big boys walking into Doogie's at lunchtime and ingesting a pair of them (that's about six feet of frankfurter!) with a large soda and an order of jumbo French fries with cheese sauce on the side.

If only for its size, Doogie's hot dog would be worth noting in the annals of amazing

Roadfood: but the more important fact is that this extra-long sausage is delicious. Firm-fleshed and with a chewy skin that gets slightly charred on the grill, it has a vigorously spicy flavor that holds up well not only under any and all extra-cost toppings but also when spread with Doogie's superb homemade hot relish or just ordinary mustard. The brand name of the dog is Grote & Weigal, and for those of meek appetites, it is available in mere ten-inch configuration, too. Mention must also be made of the bun, which of necessity is significantly sturdier than your ordinary cotton-soft hot dog roll. More like a grinder roll, but somewhat slimmer, Doogie's bun is actual, good-quality bread! We have never seen anyone actually pick up a whole hot dog and bun, though. Etiquette for eating one of these fellas is to grasp one end eight to ten inches from the tip and tear off a section that would be about the size of a normal frankfurter anywhere else. You'll get about four of these per dog.

Beyond hot dogs, Doogie's sells all sorts of other sandwiches, New England-style clam chowder, a real hot lobster roll, and that junkiest of junk foods, so beloved hereabouts--fried dough. Doogie's version, a plate-size disc of deep-fried dough, is available veiled in cinnamon sugar or under a blanket of red tomato sauce. Either way, it is a mouthful!

Hamburgers, cooked on the same charcoal grill where the hot dogs are made, have a delicious smoky flavor. The top-of-the-line hamburger is described on the menu as "the ultimate"; and while not as awesome as the elongated hot dog, it is quite a sight: two five-ounce patties with bacon, cheese, grilled onions, and sauteed mushrooms. Its formal name on the menu is the Murder Burger.

Casual in the extreme, Doogie's is a serve-yourself joint (adjacent to Ruth's Chris Steak House, which might be a good fall-back if you arrive after 8 p.m. when Doogie's closes). Step up to the counter, place your order, pay your money, and wait for your name to be called. When your order is ready, tote your tray to the condiment bar, heap on what you like, find a molded plastic seat in the square little dining room, and prepare to feast on the king of all weenies.

Dr. Mike's

158 Greenwood Ave. / 203-792-4388

Bethel, CT / LD / \$

Forget psychotherapy and medication! The best antidepressant we know is a visit to Dr. Mike's. We didn't know about Dr. Mike's ice cream shop when we moved to a neighboring town, but it wasn't too long before chowhounds in the neighborhood clued us in. We found the out-of-the-way place off Bethel's main street and, at first lick, we became converts. As ice cream lovers, we must tell you that there is nothing quite like Dr. Mike's, and there are occasions--rare occasions--when its ultra-richness is actually too, too much.

Most of the time, the cones and cardboard cups dished out year-round by this little shop are just what the doctor ordered. Several proprietary flavors set standards unequalled by

any other brand. The long-time standard-bearer, "rich chocolate," for example, is stunningly flavored, cocoa brown, and more deliriously chocolaty than a pure melted Hershey bar, but has the added luxury of all that high-butterfat cream. We must warn you, however, that sometimes it gets scooped from the tub cold and hard; and the flavor does not blossom until it is on the verge of melting. This makes for an unbelievably messy cone, and a good possibility of dark chocolate stains on your hands, face, and clothes (somehow, this chocolate ice cream leaves smears that are far more conspicuous than any other brand); but you must wait until the rich chocolate ice cream is soft. If you do, bliss is yours.

"Chocolate lace and cream" is another Dr. Mike's invention, made with a luxurious chocolate-covered hard candy produced by a local confectionery. The candy is broken into bite-size pieces and suspended in a pure white emulsion of sweetened cream: another dreamy experience, but in this case our warning is to get it in a cup. The crunch of the candy conflicts with the crunch of a cone.

We've named our two favorite flavors. Don't hesitate, though, if you find your personal favorite among the approximately six varieties available any particular day. Each one is made the old-fashioned way, using cream from dairy buckets, in five-gallon batches; and we have fond, fond memories of Dr. Mike's coffee, coconut, cinnamon, Heath Bar crunch, even prune, dazzling vanilla, and some real tongue-stunners made with fresh fruits in the summer.

After you have tasted the ice cream in its unadulterated state, please return to Dr. Mike's for a milk shake (none thicker this side of St. Louis) or a hot fudge sundae. Sundaes are huge, made so they literally fill up pint ice cream containers. The fudge is dark and dense, faintly granular, and a glorious complement to any of the light colors and fruit flavors. And the pure, sweet whipped cream is heaped on with a trowel.

Goulash Place

42 Highland Ave. / 203-744-1971

Danbury, CT / LD / \$

For the last quarter-century, this hard-to-find restaurant in a mostly residential neighborhood has been a wonderful--and wonderfully inexpensive--enclave of East European gastronomy. John and Magda Aczel live upstairs in the back of their Hungarian cafe, and you'll definitely meet Magda as soon as you sit down--she runs the dining room. You'll see John when the kitchen door swings open--he's the chef--and you might even meet John's mother, a ninety-something baker who also lives upstairs and is responsible for the intoxicating rum cake that is an occasional dessert menu special.

Made-from-scratch specialties include three kinds of goulash (veal, beef, or pork and sauerkraut), chicken paprikash, and wiener schnitzel. Side dishes include chunky, soulful mashed potatoes served with gravy from whatever they accompany, and also nockerli, which are little hand-fashioned dumpling squiggles in a butter sauce that go so well with

paprikash. All meals come with a bowl of traditional Hungarian cucumber salad--a refreshingly pickly taste-bud-refresher.

Start with a mushroom and ham crepe or a bowl of aromatic chicken soup and finish with a piece of Grandma's cake or palascinke (tender crepes wrapped around apricot, cheese, or chocolate filling). From soup to nuts, this good food is presented by Magda with Old World charm, and sometimes with just the right amount of impertinence to make you feel as if you are dining not in a restaurant but at the home of your favorite relative.

JK's

126 South St. / 203-743-4004

Danbury, CT / BLD / Mon-Sat / \$

JK's looks like any modern fast-food restaurant, but photographs on the wall tell another story: decades of weenie history. The nostalgic black-and-white pictures show JK's with its hot dog sign hanging over Main Street many years ago; interior pictures show a spic-and-span diner that has served the Hat City's working-class clientele since the 1930s.

The place may have changed, but old-timers tell us that the Texas hot wieners on which JK's built its reputation remain precisely the same charming little frankfurters they've always been. They are plump sausages, split lengthwise and cooked until slightly crusty on the surface, loaded into a big spongy roll, then topped with mustard, onions, and hot sauce with a chile pepper kick. No single element of this arrangement has flavor to write home about, but the combination is powerfully attractive. You might order two, with a thick chocolate milk shake on the side, but midway through the second dog, you will likely be flagging down the waitress for a third, and possibly a fourth. The speedy gals who tend the short counter and the booths throughout the dining room are masters of balance, toting up to six or eight hot dog plates to different tables in a single trip from the semi-open kitchen in back.

There are all sorts of other things on JK's menu, from silver dollar pancakes at breakfast to New England's favorite Grape-Nuts pudding for dessert, but it's the devilish Texas dogs that put this restaurant on our map. Some connoisseurs order them with cheese, chili, and/or bacon in addition to the usual condiments; it's also possible to get a heap of excellent house-made slaw on top or to get the bun toasted: all interesting strategies, but we suggest first-timers stick with the original configuration . . . at least for the first round.

Laurel Diner

544 Main St. / 203-264-8218

Southbury, CT / BL Mon-Sat; / BLD Sun / \$

Adjacent to the Laurel Service Station, the Laurel Diner is a fifty-year-old hash house with

a row of counter seats that provide a view of the grill and six tables lined up opposite the counter. It opens seven days a week at 5:30; and by mid-morning, sections of Connecticut's daily papers are strewn almost everywhere, providing easy-reach reading no matter where you sit. The menu is written daily in multi-colored marking pens directly on the diner's wall, which is a white, easy-wipe surface that helps give the vintage dining room an airy feel.

We don't recommend you pay much attention to the menu at breakfast time, because there is one and only one dish to know about: corned beef hash. This is the real thing, a coarse-cut melange of spicy beef shreds and nuggets of potato cooked on the griddle until a web of crust begins to envelop the tender insides. If you ask, the grill man will cook the hash until it is brittle-crisp nearly all the way through, which is a great idea if textural excitement supersedes succulence in your hierarchy of culinary pleasure; but we personally enjoy it the regular way: forkfuls of corned beef that are brick red and moist, their pickly zest balanced perfectly by the soft pieces of potato. On the side come crunchy hash browns, and atop the hash are served eggs as you like them. It is a royally good diner breakfast, for the very common price of \$5, including toast and coffee, and all the local newspapers you can read.

At lunch, we seldom get anything other than a hamburger. Laurel's burgers are nothing like fast-food burgers; they are thick, hand-formed patties, cooked to order, and fairly spurting juice at first bite. Other worthy lunch items are the hearty all-beef (no bean) chili, made with thick hunks of hamburger meat and available with melted cheese and/or raw onion silvers on top, and a fine fat length of kielbasa with peppers on a hard roll.

If you're hungry and also need an oil change, call ahead to the service station (where the pumps open at seven and the garage at nine) and make an appointment. Your vehicle can be in and out in thirty minutes, which is about as long as it takes to order and enjoy breakfast next door. The service station number is 203-264-9100.

Other Books

Access.

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