

- The unofficial Famous Lunch fan site -

# FAMOUS LUNCH

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**Famous Lunch** - 111 Congress Street / Troy, New York 12180 / (518) 272-9481

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**Famous Lunch** in the [Belltown Messenger](#) - *March 2005*

## Hot Dog Cult

### Famous Lunch has been buying locally since 1932

by Amy Halloran

*photos by James DeSeve*

Famous Lunch is 75 years old and soon they will hang a birthday banner on the building. They'll offer hot dogs for 32 cents -- the price reflecting the year they opened. They're printing up t-shirts and will have some raffles. But business will be business as usual.



Nothing is very fussy at Famous Lunch in downtown Troy, a little city in upstate New York. The eatery is clean and crowded. The low stools at the counter are often filled. Salt, pepper and a metal napkin dispenser sit on the Formica topped tables at the booths, but no menus. A few years ago someone removed the menus that hung on the wall over the grill and the cold cases, so if you don't know the menu by heart, you have to ask.

Two signs for sandwiches hang over the hamburger/sausage/egg grill and the cold cases: a grilled chicken breast or a sausage, pepper and onion. Shy newcomers order hot dogs and fries, because you can see the hot dog grill from the sidewalk and the fry baskets at the counter, where you order. The less shy and equally uninitiated will ask for a menu, and get to choose from selections listed on a plain sheet of white paper trapped in clear plastic. On the back of these choices are facts about Famous Lunch: frank facts, what was happening in 1932 when the place opened, who ate the most hot dogs and when that was, though the numbers are probably old. Updating is not a priority around here.

If it's not broken, why fix?

A wooden telephone booth - change your clothes Clark Kent style -- stands in the back left corner of

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the lunchroom/open kitchen (to apply a modern term to an antique setting) and when the phone rings, the man who will serve your food stops making your French fries to answer it. "Hello, Famous," he says into the public phone. When you ask for rice pudding, this same man will ask if you want cream, and if you are surprised when he squirts half and half in your melmac bowl instead of whipped cream, you've never been here.

This Greek hot dog joint started life as "Quick Lunch" in the Great Depression, selling little dogs in little buns at this same skinny storefront. The walls are still lined in shiny enameled steel, and the hot dogs, which are still made the next block over, are still cooked in the front window. Passerby used to marvel at the "Hairy Arm": a cook lined his arm with buns, filled them with 4 inch hot dogs, and topped the sausages with Zippy sauce, chopped onions and mustard. The Health Department put an end to the "Hairy Arm" decades ago, but knowledge of this old school food prep method is as much of a fixture to locals as this eatery. The food is cheap, no nonsense and filling.

In 1954 "Quick Lunch" became Famous when a Troy marine who was stationed in Moscow convinced the staff of the U.S. Embassy to fly a bunch of dogs over for a party. The feat was dubbed "Operation Hot Dogs" and changed the restaurant's name. The affair also one-upped the local competition; Hot Dog Charlie's, which opened ten years before Famous in 1922, was across the alley. Scott Vasil, however, dismisses the idea of competition.

"Congress Street was busy," says Vasil, the third generation in his family to run the Famous show. "There was enough business for everybody to go around. Everybody was thriving. The city was real lively. You had different things going on: you had work -factories, companies, everything was running three shifts, the steel mills, the breweries. You could support local businesses - we were open 24 hours a day. Now it's different: there's nobody working here."

Famous Lunch is open from 6 or 7 a.m. till 10 p.m. at night, and closed on Sundays, except for Flag Day, when the city is thick with people. There's a parking lot where Hot Dog Charlie's stood, but other Hot Dog Charlie's dot the Capital District - the area that includes Schenectady and New York's capital, Albany. There are even franchises at shopping malls. Hot Dog Charlie's all look shockingly modern in comparison to Famous Lunch - like McDonald's from the 1980's. I think I like Famous Lunch foods more because of their unchanged decor. Or maybe I love the place because it withstood the ravages of Urban Renewal and stands testament to a time when downtowns throbbed.

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DELICIOUS CITY

Across the river from Troy in Watervliet is Gus', a roadside stand with similar fare (but no fry-o-lator) whose prices make Famous' Lunch seem expensive. Gus', Hot Dog Charlie's and Famous Lunch are a triumvirate of ancient local fast food. They use breads and pastries from nearby bakeries, and meats from regional butchers. The Greek families that began these joints are connected either by blood or a vague fraternal brotherhood that involves men standing up for each other at their weddings. But the operations stand alone.

The Troy Pork Store makes, and has always made, the hot dogs for Famous Lunch. The Troy Pork Store used to make Gus' hot dogs, too, but stopped recently when the store changed hands. Troy Pork Store has been making German Franks and Specialty Sausages onsite since 1918. Walter Pohlmann, who was born in Germany, ran the business from 1957 - 2004, and Walt's Weinees were the affectionate title the dogs got under his handling. The new owners still get visits from Pohlman and the food hasn't changed. Pigs of all kind still decorate the windows, but the place is now polished.

Carmen Amedio may hail from an Italian deli/butcher family, but he makes the same wonderful German salami that is so good it is not always in stock, but in the smokehouse. The Troy Pork Store uses sawdust to smoke its ham and bacon, and a liquid smoke product is in their hot dogs, ring baloney and kielbasas. My kids are addicted to the salami, and so am I. It is a little sweet and a little hot and shares nothing with Genoa salami but a name.



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Another German meat shop, Rolf's Pork Store, also makes small hot dogs, and is the oldest butcher in upstate New York. Rolf's is a quick drive from the Capital building, but when the storefront opened in 1867, the family farm was right next door to the shop. When I put Rolf's hot dogs up against those from the Troy Pork Store in a family taste test, neither won. Rolf's were described as more sausagey, and the mini-dogs from Troy were called more hot-doggy. A third regional pork store, Hembold's, makes a mini-mini-dog that are a little spicy and called cocktail franks, but they were not included in this sample. These are, however, excellent wrapped inside whack-on-the-counter biscuits, as I'm sure the dogs from Rolf and Troy Pork Store would be too. If that is, you felt inclined to squeeze them into something other than a Bella Napoli bun.

Rolf's still smokes its meats and even some salmon in the original smoker, a couple of small walk-in rooms fed from below by woodchip fires. The smoker has been updated over the years, tiled and lined with stainless steel. The cutting kitchen that surrounds the smoker is shiny, too, and filled with the standard equipment: an industrial sized Hobart mixer and dishwasher, a slicer, sinks and sprayers.



Rolf's Pork Store has a long list of wursts and schinkens to choose from. When I strayed from my favorite Weisswurst, a lovely white sausage speckled with parsley, I was rewarded with a powerful mouthful from the garlic sausage I bought. The stuff was a touch too salty for my mother-in-law, who was visiting, but the rest of us gobbled the stuff down, and drowned it in glasses of water and bottles of beer. I laid out a spread of spreads for lunch one day, including two kinds of liverwurst, smoked and plain, and a jagerwurst, but the only one that disappeared was the unsmoked liverwurst. It wasn't too sweet and it was just great with a little mustard and the big bite of a little red onion. The Indian summer tomato from the yard did not hurt the sandwich one bit.

In general, the food from Rolf's has a very mild smokiness compared to Troy Pork Store's foods.

This could be related to the lack of liquid smoke. Rolf's uses no nitrites or other preservatives, either, and taught me what "water-added" means on a ham label. "There's a difference between injecting water into a ham - and when saltwater goes into the vein in the ham, which is then drained after smoking," the woman who runs Rolf's told me. Kathy Eggelhoefer's father bought the business in 1968, and now her son is working with her, so it looks like Rolf's will be around for another long while.

Both Rolf's and Troy Pork Stores use family recipes and German methods to create distinct products in a muddy-tongued climate. While both of the places use meats from factory farms, and I am inclined to avoid those these days, I can't afford to buy all my meat from local farmers. Even if the raw materials come from an industry that deserves sweeping reforms, I am still happy to shop with these local businesses, and taste great bits of time preserved. Where else can you eat history?

Besides, as I learned when I traveled with my best friend to Italy and refused the incredible food his relatives offered me - because I was a vegetarian - you lose out on life when you live by limits.





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## **FAMOUS LUNCH**