"I'D FULLY COMMITTED MYSELF TO HATING JOY."

I ATE THE WHOLE THING!

ONE MAN’S QUEST TO CHOMP THROUGH 39 POUNDS’ WORTH OF PORTLAND FOOD CHALLENGES.

BY MATTHEW KORFHÄGE

PAGE 11
Nobody loved a party more than Pondo Kosmas. And if you run a Greek deli, eating and drinking to painful excess is what a party is all about. The late owner of the Mad Greek Deli on East Burnside Street— he passed away suddenly in February at age 49— ran one of the nation’s most insane food challenges for a decade at two locations of his family’s deli. Mad Greek’s 10-pound monster sandwich is stuffed with salami, pepperoni, turkey, ham and three kinds of cheese, plus pepperoncini and a mountain of tomatoes, onions and lettuce. It’s all stacked high onto a 24-inch bun and slathered in oil and vinegar, then topped with olives. Contestants get one hour to polish off the whole thing along with a pound of Greek fries and 32 ounces of their beverage of choice. The challenge is pretty much impossible, which is why only three people have ever finished it—and two of them were competitive eaters who flew to Portland, lured by a jackpot that grows by $15 every time somebody fails, which is almost always. The last winner, 115-pound Molly Schuyler of Nebraska, left with $600. The thing about Kosmas’ challenge is that it didn’t make any sense. The sandwich includes about $65 worth of ingredients— much more than the $30 sandwich costs, even if you lose your bet— all of which the late cook weighed personally and assembled lovingly by hand. “The only way to understand it is to know Pondo,” says Jake Marks, a longtime friend who has helped manage the deli since Kosmas’ death. “It was all about family and community. The 20 bucks wasn’t the big deal. It was, ‘Someone’s going to try it again!’” But nothing about competitive eating really make sense. That’s what I learned from my weeks-long journey through all of the Portland area’s meaningful food challenges—that is, the challenges where you don’t have to pay if you finish. In tribute to Kosmas, I took on challenges involving pounds of pho, steaming plates of Cambodian hot wings, and a mammoth hunk of steak that a previous generation of my family attempted to eat. I learned what it is like to be a python— stretching my stomach to imbibe many meals’ worth of food in a single sitting and then slowly digesting it over the course of days. And I did it at personal peril not only to my health, but to my bank account (see below). My first stop was Mad Greek Deli— the first time someone attempted to eat the 10-pound sandwich since Kosmas’ death. “It was the first time we got together as a group to do it for him,” Marks says. “It was emotional for all of us. Because he was that guy. What we do here is a labor of love. It’s something that will always be very near and dear to us forever.”

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He is pulling, slicing and carefully weighing the Çelik, who’s in the kitchen building my ruined future. Together we are watching Mad Greek’s Ahmet He seems unendingly happy about this. “You’re gonna get the meat sweats,” says Kevin, a regular customer at Mad Greek Deli. He thinks about “You’re gonna get the meat sweats,” says Kevin, a regular customer at Mad Greek Deli. He thinks about how to complete this challenge, by a man who calls himself Max Carnegie—he’s completed almost every eating challenge near Portland that isn’t the Mad Greek (see sidebar, page 13). But though he has told me to...

The stakes:

$15 goes into a kitty. Many, many people have lost.

The stakes:

$4.50 and a button.

Result: Failure. But the remaining half of the sandwich is

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Health effects:

When I leave, I feel drunk, though I am very sober. There is no blood anywhere near my brain, and even the five-block drive home feels dangerous. My stomach does not quite hurt—but it is angry enough I wake up almost every hour during the night. I eat no food until 10 pm the next day.

The Tex-Ass Doughnut at Voodoo Doughnut

My first attempts to visit Voodoo Doughnut don’t really work out. After three failed tries to avoid lines at off-hours—apparently there was a David Bowie tribute—I end up at the eastside location at 9 am on a Monday. When I say I want to take the challenge, the girl behind the counter asks what city I’m from. When I say Portland, she looks amused.

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**Advice From the Experts**

After my drastically failed attempt eating a 10-pound sandwich at Mad Greek Deli, it was blazingly apparent I was ill-equipped to handle an eating challenge on my own. And so I consulted Ryan Rodacker—otherwise known as Max Carnegie, president of Portland’s Big Eaters Club. Look on the walls of almost any restaurant hosting an eating challenge in Oregon, and you’ll find Carnegie in Polaroid form among the winners. Here’s what I learned.

**You have to stretch your stomach.** Starving before eating doesn’t work—your belly gets too small. "I can eat 5, 6 pounds without prepping," says Carnegie, "but for a big event, what I like to do is eat a whole bunch of salad the night before." The roughage cleans you out and fills your belly—but it’s gone by the next day. He then drinks water in the morning, along with some coffee to encourage urinating. "What some people do is drink over a gallon of water in five or six minutes," he says, "then throw it back up. But that’s dangerous." Nonetheless, Carnegie has done it. His Facebook is filled with images of "water-stretching."

**Manage your water.** The biggest thing holding you back from eating, short of sheer physical capacity, is the moisture in your mouth. "There’s a lot of salt in meat and cheese," says Carnegie, which dries you out. "But when you drink water, it takes up space in your belly. What you have to do is take micro-sips."

**Dunk whatever you can.** Dunking food adds just enough moisture to swallow. For the giant Tex-Ass doughnut at Voodoo, says Carnegie, "you rip the doughnut into six pieces, then ball them up real tight and dunk each one in water." I forgot to ball them up, and I failed the challenge. Carnegie, on the other hand, beat the 80-second challenge within a mere 17 seconds.

**Wait till your food cools before you start.** Otherwise it hurts.

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**The Crazy Wings at Mekong Bistro**

At Portland’s only remaining Cambodian restaurant, a tucked-away Northeast 82nd Avenue eatery that doubles as a sports bar, I dive into a bowl of steaming crazy wings far too soon. They are too hot to eat—in temperature, not spice.

**But you know what? It doesn’t matter.**

The crazy wings at Mekong are simply sweet-hot fish-sauce wings with balanced spice, pretty much how I’d order them if I was eating for pleasure. The bird’s eye pepper heat doesn’t linger or build and punish like, say, habanero or ghost pepper.

There are special techniques I’ve learned for eating wings, both from the internet and local big eater Max Carnegie (see left): The “typewriter,” the “meat umbrella,” the “bone splitter.” I don’t do any of them. What I do is I eat the wings, one by one, until they’re gone, with 26 seconds to go.

My lips sting. My fingers sting at their cuticles. And for the first time, I am a winner. Frankly, even if I’d lost, $10 is a hell of a deal on 25 wings.

"Next time?" says Mekong’s server. "Ostrich wings."

**Result:** Success! I am now the proud owner of a Mekong Bistro T-shirt.

**Health effects:** Oh, God. It begins at 4 am, when I wake up feeling that parts of me have liquified. Capsaicin has accumulated within me in such bulk it has transformed my body into an acid kellet. It is like giving birth to a school of angry piranhas, one by one.

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**Pho Challenge at Pho Tango**

Pho Tango is a somewhat nondescript mini-mall Hillsboro pho spot with one highly distinctive feature: a gigantic bowl of pho. When it arrives, the bowl is massive—but the second I see the plate under it, I know what I’m going to do. I pull out all the noodles and beef, slopping them onto the plate in hopes much of the water will evaporate. I eat all the beef immediately, while I can still swallow.

Over time, the noodles dry into a sort of glutinous paste. It is the most tedious meal I’ve ever eaten—a plate of slowly drying, sticky rice, mildly sweetened with whatever pho broth remains within it, eaten over what seems like an eternity. I’m done with eight minutes to spare.

When done, I’m left feeling like the kid at a soccer game who doesn’t have a mother. We try steadfastly to get the staff’s attention. "I finished! I’m done! I did it! Look, ma!"

Eventually our server almost wordlessly wanders over with a camera and a little flag that reads “I DID IT!” and takes my picture.

There is no T-shirt. Still, I leave a winner, swollen with rice.

**Result:** Winner!

**Health effects:** The simple starches in this challenge make it the easiest to digest. After less than 24 hours, I feel almost human.

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**Supreme Pizza at Flying Pie Pizzeria**

I am afraid of this challenge for a personal reason: Flying Pie’s pizza and I go way back, and I do not want to associate this pizza with pain.

At a normal pizzeria, eating a 16-inch pizza would not be difficult. But Flying Pie’s slices are so monstrous that a single lunchtime slice will gorge most diners.

The dough is finger-thick, the cheese dripping, the sausage a burial mound for multiple pigs. And as with the Mad Greek Deli sandwich, there is enough salt on this thing to mess up a horse.

After 20 minutes, I feel an ever-building pressure against my tonsils as my body ceases to understand the pizza as food and begins to think of it as a toxic assault. Everything slows down.

At Mad Greek, there were cheers; at Pho Tango, there was apathy. Here at the Montavilla Flying Pie, the prevailing mood is that I’m not too bright.

"He ain’t gonna make it," says a nearby dad. "Pain is temporary," says a man in generous condolences, send me out with an additional half-pound of stray meat on the platter. The fine people of Flying Pie, in generous condolences, send me out with a T-shirt anyway.

**Result:** Failure and pain.

**Health effects:** In what amounts to an egregious tactical error, I visit a beer festival thereafter, reasoning that a few samples couldn’t hurt me. I am wrong. I am like an ancient Hebrew caught at adultery, whose punishment is death by stomach rupture as grain expands within. Once I finally reach a chair, I do not move or think or speak for over two hours.

“Pain is temporary,” says a nearby dad. I died on the final slice, with probably an additional half-pound of stray meat on the platter. The fine people of Flying Pie, in generous condolences, send me out with a T-shirt anyway.

**Result:** Winner!

**Health effects:** The simple starches in this challenge make it the easiest to digest. After less than 24 hours, I feel almost human.

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**CONT. on page 14**
**CALZONE AT**

**GOGO BURGERS AT**

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**MARCH 28 AT 7 PM**

The challenge: Eat a 5-pound calzone in 30 minutes.
The stakes: $30.

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Somehow I never knew this place existed. Gogo is a Vietnamese burger shop in Aloha that also serves pho, and used to be a Mongolian grill. It now makes stacked multi-patty burgers and offers a giant condiment bar.

“Go for it!” shouts a man from the kitchen as I pile into the foot-tall burgers, each stacked with four half-pound beef patties and much, much bacon, lettuce, tomato and onion. Even sauceless, the burgers are pretty damn nice. And I get through them both in about 40 minutes.

The fries, though, are trouble. By the time I get to the fries, they are 2 pounds of cold, salty and oily mass that offers little incentive to continue. The mush accumulates in my cheeks, refusing to pass the gullet.

**Result:** Failure is becoming the new normal. Also, I am losing so much money. Think of the wonderful meal I could have had for $40 somewhere else.

**Health effects:** This is just the new me, walking around with a food baby, retaining so much water you’d swear I was actually pregnant.

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**MARCH 31 AT 6 PM**

The challenge: Eat two gigantic, towering four-patty burgers, plus 2 pounds of french fries, in an hour.
The stakes: $40.

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Kindly, the staff allows you to cut apart the calzone and let it cool so you don’t singe your mouth. Unkindly, they give you only 30 minutes to eat 5 pounds of thick- as crust, sauce, cheese, olives, peppers and pepperoni. I cut it into itty-bitty pieces, and it’s pretty much room temperature by the time we start the egg timers.

The olives and peppers take their sodium toll, and the dough feels unswallovable after the first 15 minutes, but I get painfully close before the challenge ends. There’s about a lunch slice of pizza left when I’m done.

I’m maybe a half-pound shy. The proximity to victory is...painful.

**Result:** Close is no cigar. But I walked out with a T-shirt. “It doesn’t say winner,” says the server. “And it doesn’t say loser.”

**Health effects:** Am I getting used to this? I’m...eerie fine. My body has become accustomed to this bizarre rhythm of bingeing and fasting. But the next day, two angry zits appear on my face. I am unhealthy. And I am starting to measure all food in pounds.

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The spelling of “Pizzaria” lets you know there’s something different going on here: This is a Greek pizzeria, and so the fillings in the calzones are equally Greek. There is gyro meat on pizzas.

The food challenge is sort of a choose-your-own adventure. The massive shell of the calzone is the same, but what’s inside the dough is chosen by the eater, with eight options.

I opt for vegetarian. I am becoming, slowly, afraid of meat.

Opa limits winners of its challenge to one attempt a year. “There are people who could do this once a week for a free meal,” says our server. “We had to set limits.”

On the photo board of winners, the same few people show up again and again. “This lady ate a 7-pound calzone,” the server says.

**Result:** Close is no cigar. But I walked out with a T-shirt. “It doesn’t say winner,” says the server. “And it doesn’t say loser.”

**Health effects:** Am I getting used to this? I’m...eerie fine. My body has become accustomed to this bizarre rhythm of bingeing and fasting. But the next day, two angry zits appear on my face. I am unhealthy. And I am starting to measure all food in pounds.

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Willamette Week | APRIL 6, 2016 | wweek.com
The challenge: Eat a 72-ounce steak, plus all the trimmings, in one hour.
The stakes: $65 and a T-shirt.

The Mad Greek Deli’s challenge may be the most insane in town. But
the one at Sayler's Old Country Kitchen is the most famous.
Since 1948, this hulking East Portland steakhouse—it looks like the
lobby of a Red Lion—has offered a free meal to anyone eating an uninter-
rupted 4½ pounds of boneless, no-trim beef, accompanied by a nonsen-
sical array of sides: two each of pickles, olives, carrots and celery, a piece
of bread, 10 french fries, an onion ring, and a little bowl of ice cream.

The challenge is a change to avenge my Uncle Rick, who attempted to
eat the steak in 1973 when he visited Portland for the East-West Oregon
Shrine All-Star football game. He made it through only two-thirds; the
Shriners picked up the tab.

I’m allowed to eat the salad early—probably a means of tiding me
over because it takes almost an hour to cook a 72-ounce steak medium
rare. Next to me is a man eating a 40-ounce steak he says lasts him three
meals. He wishes me good luck.

But you know what? I may struggle with bread, chewing endlessly,
and I may give up in the face of french fries. But meat is meat, and I like
it. Some primal, pre-civilization impulse keeps me chewing. After trim-
ming around the hard-to-swallow well-done bits on the outside, when I
am down to about 24 ounces of mostly red meat, I know that I have won.

Upon downing my mostly melted bowl of ice cream and cleaning up
the weird parts for good measure—with two minutes to spare—I fi
nally
understand why anyone would undergo the pain of an eating challenge.
It is an enormously satisfying accomplishment, if also egregiously waste-
ful in ways I should probably recognize.

Along with a T-shirt proclaiming “I ate the WHOLE Thing,” I receive
two little white numbers with adhesive on the back. On the big board that
greets all visitors to Sayler’s, I change the number of men who have suc-
cceeded in eating the steak from 639 to 640—satisfied in the knowledge
that I had won, and that I would never have to do anything like that again.

Result: Success, sweet success, and family pride.
Health effects: A sense of well-being doctors could never fi
nd in their fancy
charts.

No Money, No Honey
PORTLAND AREA CHALLENGES THAT NO
LONGER EXIST OR DON’T OFFER FREE MEALS.

BALS OF FIRE at Salvador Molly’s
These habanero hush puppies are a
mouthful of hot glass on the way in, and an
amusement-park version of Crohn’s disease
on the way out. If you eat them, you get
nothing but pride and a picture on the wall.

DIABLO BURRITO at
Allan’s Authentic Mexican Restaurant
Once upon a time, this spicy burrito was free
if you ate it in 10 minutes. Now you get free
burritos for a year, but only if you beat some
nutty record set by a woman from Nebraska.

THE BEHEMOTH BURGER at the Ram
The Behemoth contains Anaheim pep-
pers, American cheese, cheddar cheese,
horseradish-chive havarti cheese, caramel-
ized onions, lettuce, pickle chips, mushrooms,
bacon, ham, corned beef and tomato. It costs
$25. There is no reason to eat it—it costs more
than the T-shirt you get for enduring it.

EL JEFE WINGS at Fire on the Mountain
These habanero chicken wings are a
mouthful of hot glass on the way in, and an
amusement-park version of Crohn’s disease
on the way out. But if you eat them, you get
nothing but pride and a picture on the wall.

FIVE-POUND POUTINE at the Original Dinerant
The challenge has been discontinued. You
could probably still order 5 pounds of gravy
fries and eat them for an hour. But I don’t
know why you would, and you don’t get
anything if you do.

THE MARINE at Killer Burger
This serrano-habanero-ghost-pepper burger
is off the menu. It hurt people. People threw
up. Their faces swelled up. It burned fingers. It
was the only Killer Burger burger that might
actually kill people. Some things are too damn
hot to eat, and this was one of them.