

EAT

BUFFALO

Famed for its eponymous wings, New York State's second-biggest city is finding a new audience for its home-spun fast food. And there's a distinctly local feel to the city's take on Americana food culture. Words: Neil Davey



To my left, there are people diving face first into a paddling pool of blue cheese sauce. To my right, there are girls on stage explaining why they deserve to be crowned Miss Buffalo Wing 2019. And, surrounding me, in the temporarily repurposed Sahlen Field baseball stadium, there are tens of thousands of people preparing chicken wings, serving chicken wings, queuing for chicken wings, eating chicken wings and talking chicken wings. Frankly, Bill Murray has a lot to answer for.

Yes, Bill Murray; *that* Bill Murray. There are many places that are big on food tourism — Venice, Bangkok, Tokyo, Padstow — but few lend their name to one of the world's most popular dishes. Buffalo, New York is the home of the Buffalo chicken wing, and the brilliant chaos that owes its invention to Bill Murray is the National Buffalo Wing Festival.

“There was a movie back in 2001 called *Osmosis Jones*,” festival founder Drew ‘The Wing King’ Cerza tells me. “Bill Murray’s character was a big junk food eater who

loved chicken wings and was travelling to the Buffalo Wing Festival in Buffalo. But, in 2001, Buffalo didn’t have a festival dedicated to chicken wings. Our local paper wrote an article that all these wings around the world are branded with the name of our city, why don’t we have a festival? I was a food promoter at the time and one thing led to another and here we are.”

And thus, on Labor Day weekend 2002, the National Buffalo Wing Festival began. Fast forward 17 years and the festival has grown to a quite incredible level. Once the dust has settled, the ‘dipping for wings’ blue cheese paddling pool has been tidied away, Miss Buffalo Wing 2019 has been crowned and a surprisingly slight man called Geoffrey Esper has won the United States Chicken Wing Eating Championship (281 wings in 12 minutes), it’s all over for another year. Drew tells me that this year’s festival involved some 55,000 visitors and 24 tons of wings.

It’s a remarkable achievement, but then Buffalo is a remarkable place. It’s New York

ABOVE: A colourful mural on Elmwood Avenue
OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A bartender mixes dram box cocktails at Frank Lloyd Wright Fontana Boathouse; Anchor Bar, where Buffalo wings were invented in 1964; a meatloaf sandwich at Swan Street Diner; the view southwards down Main Street in downtown

IMAGES: SUPERSTOCK; GETTY; NEILDAVEY; SHUTTERSTOCK





Buffalo wings at Bar-Bill Tavern
RIGHT: Mini doughnuts at
 Swan Street Diner

A TASTE OF Buffalo



SWAN STREET DINER

This beautifully restored, mahogany-lined 1930s diner offers hearty breakfasts and lunch dishes from 7am until 3pm daily. These days, the menu also offers healthier options, but the calorific temptations are hard to resist, particularly the Meatloaf Melt and mini doughnuts. You can't reserve a table, but service is efficient and it's absolutely worth the wait. \$30 (£23) per person, including beer or wine. swanstreetdiner.com

THE ANCHOR BAR

There's an air of the theme-bar to this place; there's a gift shop, the walls are lined with signed celebrity photos and licence plates, while motorbikes hang from the ceiling. Wings are portioned as Single (10 wings), Double (20) or Bucket (50) in a choice of seven sauces and heat ranges. There are also sandwiches, burgers, seafood and, to reflect the restaurant's pre-chicken history, classic Italian dishes. \$40 (£31) per person, including a beer. anchorbar.com

MARBLE + RYE

This repurposed industrial venue serves up a menu that's strictly seasonal, featuring snacks, larger plates plus cocktails, craft beer and whiskey-heavy drinks. The execution is immaculate, too. There are plenty of internationally inspired dishes — think tandoori cauliflower and Korean-style octopus — but don't miss the American classics, including a fine double cheeseburger. \$65 (£51) per person, including a drink. marbleandrye.net

State's second-biggest city but, like so many places with an industrial heritage, the last few decades have been tough. However, Buffalo feels like it's bouncing back. Old buildings are being repurposed to great effect, from the Buffalo State Asylum for the Insane — which is now the impressively luxurious (if allegedly haunted) Hotel Henry — to the huge riverside grain elevators that now house, among other things, chic bars, breweries and a zip-line experience.

While new life is creeping in, it's the city's historic culinary heritage that's also finding a fresh, appreciative audience outside of Buffalonian circles.

We have to start with Buffalo wings, of course, and that means a pilgrimage to the Anchor Bar, the place where it all started. On a weekday lunchtime, the place is packed with a good mix of locals — positioned around the bar, drinking beer, watching sports — and tourists who have come to the source for, well, the sauce.

Having heard various versions of the origin story, I ask Mark Dempsey, CEO and partner of the Anchor Bar, to tell me how Buffalo wings came to be.

"In 1935, the Anchor Bar started as an Italian restaurant, owned by Frank and Teressa [Bellissimo]," Mark explains. "They moved to this location in 1942 and, in 1964, on a cold night in March, their son Dominic was tending bar. Some of his friends came in

and wanted something a little different than the standard Italian fare. Teressa was in the kitchen, she had these chicken wings she'd been planning to use for stock, and instead she fried them up and put a cayenne pepper-based sauce on top, with garlic and vinegar. She added butter to calm the heat down, and celery and a blue cheese sauce to do the same.

"They kind of looked at them like, 'what are these things?' But once they started eating them, they were sold. The wings went on the menu a couple of months later and, slowly, word started spreading around Buffalo about this new dish. They gained popularity in the 1970s and blossomed in the 80s."

And blossom they did. The original Anchor Bar serves around 5,000 people and 2,000lbs of wings a day — not including the 15 franchise operations across Canada and the US, the FedEx deliveries ("Christmas and Super Bowl are our busy times," explains Mark), or the 4,000 supermarkets that sell their original sauce. More than that, and because imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, a raft of alternative — and, frequently, very good — wing places sprang up around town: the city's official Buffalo Wing Trail features the Anchor Bar and 12 other local rivals.

While the flap over chicken wings cemented Buffalo's reputation, they're only part of the story. For those in the know, Buffalo's original claim to culinary fame

Five food finds



1

BUFFALO SPONGE CANDY

Or, basically, the inside of a Crunchie. A teeth-sticking twist on cinder toffee.

2

BEEF ON WECK

Buffalo's German heritage portrayed in one mammoth, delightfully messy, hand-held snack — provided you've got big enough hands, that is.

3

BUFFALO-STYLE PIZZA

Oddly addictive spongy, crunchy, sweet and spicy pizza with a cheese to base ratio of, approximately 60:40.

4

BUFFALO WINGS

Crispy fried chicken wings perked up with a coating of vinegary hot sauce, and cooled by the addition of butter and sides of blue cheese sauce and celery.

5

TED'S HOT DOGS

A local (and national) institution, serving burgers, fries and the titular, immense charcoal-broiled hotdogs, including the footlong.



Ted's Hot Dogs, a local institution that serves charcoal-broiled footlongs
LEFT: Buffalo sponge candy

comes in the form of a sandwich called 'beef on weck'. And for that, there's only one place to go: Schwabl's.

The 'weck' in question is the kummelweck: a bread roll that's crusty on the outside, soft and salty within, and topped with caraway seeds. It's a perfect vehicle for thick, hand-carved roast beef, with a dash of horseradish.

Local history suggests that a Bavarian baker called William Wahr, brought the recipe to the US some time in the 1800s. Another German immigrant, Sebastian Schwabl, opened his restaurant in 1837. Whether they knew one another is unclear. But, while Schwabl's doesn't claim categorically to have invented the sandwich, it suspects it did and, frankly, when its version is as good as it is, one can be forgiving about proof. Just stepping through the door is a history lesson with a gentle jazz soundtrack — waiting staff, carvers and bartenders are clad in traditional whites, and old menus on the wall show the sandwich has been served here for over a century.

Almost inevitably, Buffalo's unexpected food culture doesn't stop there. Like New York — and Newhaven in neighbouring Connecticut — Buffalo has its own pizza style: a thick, but light and airy base, sweet sauce, copious (possibly heart-stopping) amounts of cheese, topped with 'cup-and-char' pepperoni — disk-like slices that curl up at the edges when cooked. At first bite, it's a safely bland crowd-pleaser. By third slice, it's an addiction. No wonder Bocce

Club Pizza — which probably originated this version — has been selling it for more than 70 years and ships hundreds across the US every week.

Buffalo's food history is peppered with similar long runners sold from venues that continue to pack them in today. Ted's Hot Dogs, for example, has been serving charcoal-broiled links since 1927. Parkside Candies — purveyors of another local 'delicacy' called Buffalo sponge candy (think chocolate-covered cinder toffee or, if you prefer, misshapen Crunchie bars in miniature) — dates back to the same year. Anderson's Frozen Custard, meanwhile, has been serving sweet treats to Buffalonians since 1946.

One could, no doubt, argue that there's nothing cutting edge here. A beef sandwich? A cheese-heavy pizza? Decades-old hot dogs, ice cream and candy stores? Even the invention of Buffalo wings is, really, simply a twist on fried chicken, but each dish — particularly the latter — reinforces the city's long support for its own: no wonder it's sometimes called The City of Good Neighbours. Simply put, to spend a day eating in Buffalo is to spend a day immersed in a distinctively American food culture. □

✎ Buffalo is a six-hour drive from New York City or a one-hour flight, with around 70 services a day from JFK (plus more from La Guardia, and other US hubs). For further information on the region, including where to stay, visit visitbuffaloniagara.com