

The rise of the really, really, really big sandwich

A new generation of chefs are taking the sarnie to the max

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“Whether you’re Barack Obama or whoever, we all love sandwiches,” says the chef Max Halley, as a brown paper package tied up with string lands with a thud on my table. It’s a Friday night in his north London cafe, [Max’s Sandwich Shop](#), and Halley’s just delivered me a huge helping of ham hock, egg and chips with a glass of crisp white wine. Unwrapping the contents of my plate-free dinner, served between two slabs of spongy focaccia, is a delightful reprieve from the formalities of the normal restaurant experience.

The cult crowd loitering outside proves his theory in real time. “We’re going through a sandwich renaissance,” says Halley, a former self-dubbed “fancy pants” chef who opened his restaurant in 2014 with the aim of bringing precision and flair to a “formerly neglected” staple. Halley’s homemade breads are filled with everything from chicken poached in pickle juice to béchamel lasagnes. It’s basically your all-time menu favourites repackaged – and swaddled in a gluten wrap.



Max Halley's ham, egg & chips sandwich © Howard Shooter



Max's Sandwich Shop in north London © Howard Shooter

Sandwiches have long transcended class and income levels, whether pulled from the pockets of field workers and miners or eaten from silver-plated tea stands. Each culture has its own version: the bahn mi became a staple in Vietnam after the French invaded and brought with them the baguette; in India, delicate chutney versions are a local riff on colonial afternoon tea. In Puerto Rico, the tripeleta is a take on the Cuban sandwich, invented after an influx of Cubans fled Castro's rule in 1959. And, as Jamie Dornan recently [commented in this paper](#), one should make a special trip to Belfast to sample the mega "doorstep" sandwiches he proclaims to be among the best in the world.



The Pork Sambo at Mrs Palmer, Sydney, with pork belly, burnt butter ricotta, garlic sauce, lettuce, purple cabbage, cucumber, soy and crispy shallots

What's your favourite sandwich shop – and filling – in the world?

Let us know in the comments below, and we'll publish your nominations in a forthcoming story . . .

Halley's is one of a wave of new sarnie destinations. Forget the sub-par prawn cocktail or the miserable egg mayo. Today's sandwiches are a feat of structural engineering, with layers of experiential fillings that render them gorgeously gluttonous. At [Sons + Daughters](#) in London, the egg sarnie comes slathered with miso mayonnaise, while [Flora's Deli](#) in Toronto stuffs its paninis with honey-drizzled aubergine and whipped ricotta.

[Mrs Palmer Sandwich](#) in Sydney offers wagyu pastrami in soft Italian bread filled with purple cabbage and a splash of hot sauce; and at [Turkey and the Wolf](#) in New Orleans a melt comes in rye bread with slow-cooked collards, Swiss cheese, pickled cherry pepper dressing and coleslaw.



An egg sandwich with miso mayonnaise from Sons + Daughters © Felicity Spector

Have it your way: 10 of the world's best sandwich shops

[Dom's Subs](#), 262 Hackney Road, London E2 and 22B Bevis Marks, London EC3

[Flora's Deli](#), 1166 Dundas St West, Toronto M6J 1X4, Canada

[Katsu Sando](#), 736 N Broadway, Los Angeles 90012

[Katz's Deli](#), 205 E Houston St, New York 10002

[Max's Sandwich Shop](#), 19 Crouch Hill, London N4

[Mrs Palmer Sandwich](#), 81 Stanley St, Darlinghurst, NSW 2010

Polwarth Tavern, 35 Polwarth Crescent, Edinburgh EH11 1HR

Two bits of bread have become a canvas for experimentation. “Chefs have realised a plate doesn’t have to be the medium for creativity,” says Robert Casson, head cook at the [Polwarth Tavern](#) in Edinburgh; last year, he reimagined the traditional Burns Night feast by putting braised beef, potatoes and pickled turnip in a bap. After two years of hospitality shutdowns, which has seen so many restaurant closures, the sandwich – inherently utilitarian – offers chefs an easy solution for takeaways. “You don’t need a large space to sling sandwiches from,” he says.

[Sons + Daughters](#), Unit 119A,
Lower Stable Street, Coal Drops
Yard, London N1C

[SUNdeVICH](#), 601 New Jersey
Ave NW, Washington, DC 20001

[Turkey and the Wolf](#), 739
Jackson Ave, New Orleans

onion and yoghurt) into a baguette. “Once I took a bite, I knew I was onto something.”

“It’s about familiarity, convenience and gratification,” says Ali Bagheri, founder of [SUNdeVICH](#), a Capitol Hill sarnie shop that offers a menu reflecting DC’s international demographic – including the Kingston (jerk chicken with pineapple salsa) and the Cairo (brined vegetables, fresh herbs and hummus). Iranian-born Bagheri’s experimental foray began when he put quintessential Persian side dishes (herbs,





A Spicy D sandwich at Dom's Subs in London: salami, ham, provolone cheese, 'nduja mayo, Calabrian chillies, chopped onion, rocket and chilli oil

Nostalgia also draws his clientele. “I see the positive psychological impact when diners order something from their own culture or that they’ve eaten on their travels,” he says. Few people, after all, would forgo the opportunity to eat a giant pastrami on rye from [Katz’s Deli](#) in New York, or a katsu when in Tokyo. Greg Boyce, co-founder of the 2020-opened [Dom’s Subs](#) in London, recently took a trip to Manhattan to sample the local delights. “A few years ago, all the trendy places were small plates restaurants,” he says. “Now they’re sandwich bars.”



The Sofia sandwich at Flora's Deli, Toronto, with prosciutto, Coppa, sopressata, mozzarella, roasted red peppers, rocket and balsamic vinegar





The Anna, with chicken cutlet, provolone, pickled sweet pepper relish, pesto and aioli © Chuck Ortiz (2)

Halley has his own treasured gastronomic memory – the ham-filled triangles he ate on Saturday mornings while his mother had a lie-in, and he would watch cartoons: “It’s one of the first things I remember eating in my entire life”. Flora’s Deli opened last year with an aim to fill its diners’ bellies with this same feeling: it’s named after co-founder Jesse Mutch’s Calabrian grandmother. “Sandwiches were how she fed her large family and expressed her love” he says. “We want to do things honestly and properly like your grandmother would.”



A Collard Green Melt at Turkey & the Wolf in New Orleans

Today’s sandwiches are lavished with global flavours. Max’s Sandwich Shop offers kimchi and spring onion samosas; Dom’s Subs serves up spicy Thai chicken, while [Katsu Sando](#), in Los Angeles, infuses traditional US staples with unlikely Asian flavours – think honey walnut shrimp, or panko-fried turkey with gravy. “Multicultural nations are embracing that in their cuisine,” says British food historian Annie Gray. In 2022, it seems, filled bread has become the ultimate fusion food.

Max’s Sandwich Book by Max Halley is published by 535 at £16.99

