

greattastes

Big Easy mouthfuls

Muffalettas and po' boys get transcontinental treatment **by Seánan Forbes**

When New Orleans native Din Yates, chef-owner of Cheeky Sandwiches in New York City, opened his little shop near Chinatown, he wasn't thinking of home. "This started out as a sandwich shop. I'm from New Orleans, and I like po' boys, so it became a New Orleans sandwich shop."

Then Yates made a rewarding discovery. "There's a huge fan base for New Orleans food," he says, explaining that people drive an hour from New Jersey for a po' boy. Local regulars come back "two, three times a week—I generally know their names," he says.



Little oyster sandwich, \$5, Chef Andrew Carmellini, The Dutch, New York City. **RECIPE**, p. 103.

Given his clientele's devotion to classic NOLA sandwiches, Yates is nothing short of fearless when he messes with tradition. Traditionally, muffaletta is a meaty affair, a sandwich stacked high with salami, ham, mortadella, olive salad, pickled vegetables, provolone and Swiss cheese. It was born in 1906 at New Orleans' Central Grocery, where Salvatore Lupo combined muffaletta bread with the meats and salad served with it.

Cheeky's veggie muffaletta, Yates cheerfully admits, "is straight sacrilege." That acknowledged, "You have to show the veggie love." The meatless muffaletta is, "like the sandwich, but deconstructed. [We use] an olive loaf, olive spread, cheese and a pickled mix similar to giardiniera. It's the sandwich, minus the meat," says Yates, who includes finely chopped carrots, cauliflower, olives, pimentos, capers, artichoke hearts and garlic, all bathed in brine, in his mix.

When it comes to the bread, Yates uses New York City's Grandaisy Bakery's olive loaf, (\$7.20, recipe, p. 105), taking the olive salad found in traditional muffalettas to new sandwich territory. Grandaisy manager Romel Tovar observes that the bread's whole green olives lend it a briny, salty flavor. Tovar is also proud of the bread's texture: "On top, it has what we're known for—a crunchy crust. Inside, it's compact and good for sandwiches."

'ATTA (PO) BOY

The muffaletta isn't the only New Orleans sandwich with a past; the po' boy also has a storied history.

Jay Nix of the venerable Parkway Bakery and Tavern in New Orleans has the story. "The first po' boy was created in the Depression, around 1929," he says. The Martin brothers, former streetcar drivers turned restaurateurs, were sympathetic to the striking streetcar conductors. "They said, 'What are we going to feed these poor boys?'" They gave the





Duck confit po' boy
with buttered garlic,
bread and butter pickles, arugula and
Creole tomatoes, \$12,
Chef-Owner Nathaniel
Zimet, Boucherie, New
Orleans. RECIPE,
plateonline.com.

BAYOU BANH MI

New Orleans has a huge Vietnamese population, which gives the po' boy a far-from-Cajun cousin:

the *bánh mì*. They're not distant relations, really. As Linh Tran Garza, president of Dong Phuong Bakery in New Orleans, observes, Vietnam was a French colony and, like po' boys, *bánh mì* are served on French bread. The similarities continue:

"A lot of Vietnamese are shrimpers, fisherman. It's a big industry in New Orleans," she says. "For my family, they felt familiar with the food—the bread, coffee with chicory—that's what we drink in Vietnam."

All of Dong Phuong's *bánh mì* are dressed with aioli, pickled carrots and daikon, jalapeños, cilantro and cucumber, and everything—even the bread—is made in-house. "People like a thin, crispy crust," says Garza. "With New Orleans French bread, the crust is not as crispy as ours."

"poor boys" cheap sandwiches. "It was originally a sandwich with potatoes and gravy," Nix says. "It would give you the feeling that you were eating something substantial." To this day, Parkway offers a potato po' boy with roast beef gravy (\$6.30, recipe, p. 57). "The original had sliced [potatoes] sautéed with lard," he notes, but today's version is stuffed with fries.

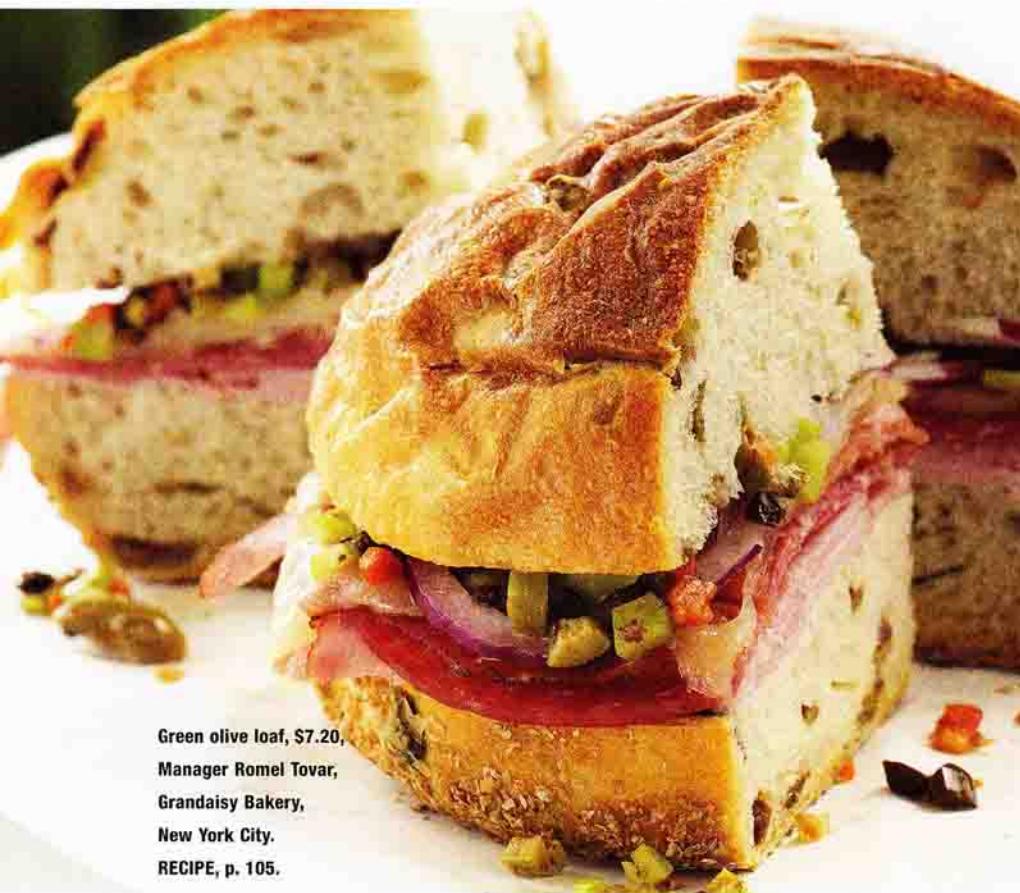
Just as for a muffaletta, the bread is paramount, says Yates. He ships his po' boy bread from New Orleans' John Gendusa Bakery, where New Orleans-style French bread was created in 1929. According to manager Jason Gendusa, the biggest part of making good French bread is time. "We let it take its time proofing—the way they did 90 years ago—so when you make that sandwich, it's got a nice crust on the outside."

Po' boys take an upscale turn at Boucherie in New Orleans, where it's hard to beat Chef-Owner Nathaniel

Zimet's duck confit po' boy with roasted garlic, bread and butter pickles, arugula and Creole tomatoes (\$12, recipe, plateonline.com). "It's part of my 'utilization of everything' concept," Zimet explains, noting that Boucherie's menu changes monthly, but there's always a duck breast preparation. He orders whole ducks, uses the bones for stock, the breasts for an entrée and the legs for confit.

Back when Zimet was operating solely out of his food truck, aka the Purple Truck, a friend took him to Dong Phuong, New Orleans' Vietnamese *bánh mì* shop. France's influence on Vietnamese food shows in the bread used for *bánh mì* and other sandwiches (see Bayou *bánh mì*, left). Dong Phuong's bread caught Zimet's attention. "I knew I had to use it for my po' boys—the outside is dark golden and solid," Zimet says. "The interior is soft, denser than traditional po' boy bread. It melts. The crust is like a barrier."

General Manager Brandon Gourges of



Green olive loaf, \$7.20,
Manager Romel Tovar,
Grandaisy Bakery,
New York City.
RECIPE, p. 105.

Katie's in New Orleans agrees, "it's all about the bread. Some French breads are too flat." Find one that has some height, he advises, so "there's more room to stuff in." Gourges also uses Gendusa's French bread. "It doesn't get soggy," Gourges says, "You can load it up with whatever you want." "Loading" is an apt word: The Baltimore sandwich at Katie's bursts with fried Louisiana oysters, bacon and Swiss cheese. Another popular offering boasts shrimp, remoulade and deep-fried tomatoes, while the biggest seller is the barge: around three-and-a-half-feet of French bread filled with catfish, crawfish, shrimp and oysters. The condiments are just as creative: the kitchen adds three types of hot

The muffaletta sandwich is made from the Sicilian bread of the same name. Salvatore Lupo, the owner of Central Grocery in New Orleans, filled the bread with the meats, cheeses and olives traditionally sold alongside, and the muffaletta sandwich was born.

sauce—including a sweet and sour one.

On the other end of the spectrum, at The Dutch in New York City, Chef-Owner Andrew Carmellini takes the oyster po' boy (also known as the Peacemaker in New Orleans) in a downsized yet upscale direction. "The Dutch is a homage to American food," says Carmellini, who serves oyster sliders at the bar (\$5, recipe, p. 103). The sandwich looks simple, and it is, but it "took a lot of technique to develop," Carmellini says. "We fried tons of oysters before we got it right. We tested pickling okra for the sauce and tried multiple bun options. Once you get it down, and the ingredients are great, it's easy to put out an awesome product. It takes," he admits, "a lot of patience."

EXOTIC BITES

If there's any lesson to be learned from Boston's All Star Sandwich Bar, it's to be open to inspiration. For brothers and owners Kosta and Johnny Diamantopoulos, an episode of the TV show "Swamp People" had them thinking about alligator: "I said, 'How cool would it be if we had a fried alligator po' boy?'" [Johnny] looked at me as if I'd just given him the meaning of life," says Kosta.

The next day, Kosta says, Johnny ordered "twenty, thirty, fifty, however many pounds of alligator." Johnny first tenderized the meat. "I cut it in chunks," he says, "and soaked it in buttermilk with hot sauce for four or five hours. Most people here had never thought to eat alligator; it was cool and different," Kosta says (recipe, plateonline.com).

For more po' boy flavor, Johnny married two cuisines. "I think Creole and Latin go well together," he says. "Why not [combine] guacamole with *rémoulade*?" A kicky hot sauce *rémoulade* spiced up All Stars' popular po' boy oyster (recipe, plateonline.com).

Susie Matheson has been working the floor of Liuzza's by the Track in New Orleans for nine years.

"On the one hand, there's the norm, like our fried shrimp po' boy," she says, while the barbecue shrimp offers more of a twist: "It's buttery, peppery, and stuffed into a *pistolette*," she says.

You can take it either way: pick something your regulars love and stuff it into a po' boy, or update a classic. "It's the comfort of knowing what you want and at the same time something unique," Matheson observes. Of course, the trick is to have your front-of-the-house staff in love with it. "I suppose some people lie easily," Matheson says. "I don't." But NOLA-inspired sandwiches are a joy to sell.

Seánan Forbes loves crawfish and oyster po' boys. For recipes from this article visit plateonline.com.