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BY DEBORAH L. COHEN

CHAIN REACTION

This is chicken-finger country. Land of the baby backs. Home of the free drink refills. What you've long suspected is true: Indy has more chain restaurants per person than almost any city in the U.S. And while that might make some independents hotter than a plate of jalapeño poppers, chains thrive here because we Hoosiers like what they serve—spectacular consistency. So, turning a haughty back to haute cuisine, we present an investigation into the local franchise phenomenon, along with some tasty sides: our own Dream Sampler of appetizers, a Hall of Fame celebrating the best versions of the chain staples, and a handy chart to keep the franchise juggernaut straight.

Photography by Tony Valainis



SPINACH-ARTICHOKE DIP



1 O'Charley's
A must-have starter that sacrifices cream for big, solid chunks of artichoke and fresh spinach. Parmesan shavings arranged on top add a gourmet touch.

Cheesecake Factory
A departure from the gloppy standard, this version has a hint of cheese. Spinach, artichoke, shallots, and garlic dominate the ramekin.

Red Lobster
A bubbling browned crust is testament to its casserole roots. But bits of sweet lobster are stirred into the mix, a signature addition that gives the dish seafood-house cred.

• HALL
OF
FAME •

It is 7 p.m. on a Tuesday night, and customers are spilling out the front door of Chili's Grill & Bar on East 82nd Street. Inside, surrounded by a seemingly random assortment of knickknacks on the walls, diners flip eagerly through the 11-page menu stacked with burgers, ribs, and chicken. The demographic here is almost as middle-America as the food itself:

families of four, mostly white, middle-class but practical about spending. Almost every one of the 48 tables is occupied.

Nothing distinguishes this particular evening, or this particular restaurant. Traveling east from Keystone Avenue to Knue Road—a distance of less than four miles—a hungry family would have a choice of nearly two dozen casual dining chains, including Applebee's, T.G.I. Friday's, Olive Garden, Red Lobster, Don Pablo's, and The Cheesecake Factory. Even on this unremarkable night in the middle of the week, many of them have a wait.

Long characterized as a quintessentially American town, the Circle City is a magnet for casual dining restaurants such as these, as well as for an abundance of other chains at both ends of the dining spectrum. They come here because they are welcomed by a community that values predictable fare, a family-friendly atmosphere, and affordable pricing. They come here in response to the city's rapid suburban growth. They come here because of low taxes, low wages, and a fairly homogenous population. Several of the chains, including O'Charley's and Rock Bottom Brewery, count some of their highest performing locations in Indy.

Much to the continuing chagrin of the city's independent eateries, a snowball effect has taken place. The highly competitive restaurant sector has always been a copycat business. Big restaurant chains, many of them public companies, are hard-pressed to satisfy shareholders with steady earnings growth, so word of a stable market spreads quickly—call it a chain reaction.

"We were one of the first casual dining chains on this street in 1993," says Christian Hershik, a manager at the 82nd

Indianapolis, as you may have noticed, has become chain heaven.



DREAM SAMPLER

If we lived in a perfect chain-restaurant world, our appetizer plate would look something like this.



"Indianapolis can be seen as a middle city in many ways: middle of the country, middle income, and middle-aged," says one local expert. "Market researchers love us folks who are in the middle."

BATTERED ONION



Outback Steakhouse (Bloomin' Onion)
Outback invented the heavily battered appetizer in 1988. Now it's the first (and most popular) item on the menu.

Red Robin (Towering Onion Rings)
A baker's dozen of breaded and seasoned rings, stacked in ascending order on a metal rod, make up this Eiffel Tower of fried bangles.

Texas Roadhouse (Cactus Blossom)
The Cactus Blossom is more battered than onion, but if you like your appetizers to have a spicy kick (the Cajun-inspired dipping sauce brings the heat), this dish, available in two sizes, packs the appropriate pre-meal punch.

• **HALL OF FAME** •

Street Chili's. "Now there are so many that no one can even hope to stand out. All you can do is push for better service, because new chains will move in and fill every gap."

Today, the greater Indianapolis metropolitan area has one of the highest concentrations of chain restaurants per capita of any market in the U.S., according to data from Asterop Inc., a San Francisco-based provider of research for the retail and restaurant industries.

In comparing similar markets, the firm determined that geographic coverage by chain restaurants here was 44 percent higher than the national average.

Asterop counted some

1,160 chain restaurants in greater Indianapolis, including 270 full-service restaurants like Applebee's, 722 fast-food joints, and 168 so-called fast-casual eateries like Qdoba, those that dish up made-to-order food quickly. Of the area's total population (1.7 million), this translates to a ratio of one chain restaurant for every 1,459 people, the highest of any metro area observed in the study.

Indy's propensity for chains runs ahead of even Columbus, Ohio, another capital city considered perfect for the eateries because of its Midwestern sensibility. With a slightly larger population of 1.75 million, the market has some 1,560 diners for each chain restaurant. Residents of Chicago, the third-largest U.S. city, can hardly find an appetizer sampler platter anywhere—at about 2,630 people for every one of its chains, it has barely half our density.

"Chains that execute well and do it consistently are very successful in Indianapolis," says Guy Stanke, vice president of operations for Tennessee-based O'Charley's, which has 13 locations in the Indianapolis area, including three of its 10 best performers. "The economy for restaurants there has been almost bulletproof."

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While everyone agrees that the casual dining chains flock here in staggering numbers, industry experts provide a variety of reasons why. One thing that can be said for sure is that it all starts with money and growth. Since 1990, the population of the Indy metro area has increased 31 percent, growing at nearly twice the rate of Chicago and well ahead of Columbus. According to the Indiana Research Center, part of Indiana

University's Kelley School of Business, the city will grow another 23 percent by 2015. The city's median household income of \$50,841 places us slightly above the national average, but not so far up as to require an influx of pricey bistros.

"Indianapolis can be seen as a middle city in many ways: middle of the state, middle of the country, middle income, perhaps even a tad more middle-aged than some others," says Carol O. Rogers, deputy director of the center. "Market researchers and retailers love us folks who are in the middle—we might be seen as 'everyone' in terms of tastes and lifestyle."

In addition to that "middle" reputation, suburban sprawl has contributed to the city's chain concentration. With miles of flat prairie land, the greater Indianapolis metropolitan area, encompassing some 3,860 square miles, has been an easy target for suburban malls and strip malls dating back several decades. It doesn't hurt that Simon Property Group, the world's largest builder of shopping malls, is headquartered here. Chains, which are well-capitalized and can meet the building requirements of malls that frequently call for restaurants with several hundred seats, are typically given preferential treatment.



FRIED & TRUE

French fries demand serious consideration. Our expert panel of tasters ranks the chain contenders.*

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

▲ RUBY TUESDAY | Crisp and peppery, a noble frite with attitude **

▲ CHILI'S | Brilliantly sprinkled with parsley and garlic

▲ O'CHARLEY'S | A thick, well-seasoned, streamlined beauty

▲ OUTBACK STEAKHOUSE | Admirable girth, but under-salted and soft in the middle

▲ T.G.I. FRIDAY'S | Slender to a fault, with no flavor to speak of

▲ ALCATRAZ BREWING CO. | Greasy and hard, with only a suggestion of pepper seasoning

▲ THE CHEESECAKE FACTORY | Bland and nearly hollow inside a too-crisp exterior

* Actual fries depicted here.
** Please pass the ketchup.

▲ APPLEBEE'S | Dry and starchy, with a freezer-burn aftertaste

THE CHAIN GANG

Love them or hate them, chain restaurants will always have a place at our dinner table. Here's a quick guide to the good, the bad, and the irresistible.



	APPLEBEE'S	CHEESEBURGER IN PARADISE	CHEESECAKE FACTORY	CHILI'S	CRACKER BARREL	O'CHARLEY'S	OLIVE GARDEN	OUTBACK STEAKHOUSE	RED LOBSTER	RED ROBIN	TEXAS ROADHOUSE	T.G.I. FRIDAY'S
CATCHPHRASE	Eatin' Good in the Neighborhood	Escape to Paradise	Something for Everyone	Pepper in Some Fun	Half Restaurant. Half Store. All Country.	Good Food, Good Times	When You're Here, You're Family	No Rules, Just Right	Come See What's Fresh Today	Where Burger Lovers Unite	Legendary Food, Legendary Service	In Here, It's Always Friday
SCENE	Everyman's sports bar	Margaritaville	McMansion	Golf clubhouse	Front-porch country kitsch	Fern bar	Planet Italy	Boomerangs and kangaroos	Shabby (nautical) chic	Space-age diner	Rugged and knotholed	Rummage sale
INDY-AREA LOCATIONS	18	2	2	9	7	6	5	5	5	2	3	7
SURE THING	Riblets: easy-to-manage square-boned slabs dripping with thick, sweet sauce	El Cubano: the traditional pressed sandwich, loaded with ham, salami, pork, cheese, mayo, mustard, and pickles	Roasted Pear and Endive Salad: with grilled chicken, bleu cheese, tomatoes, and candied pecans	Quesadilla Explosion: lettuce piled with chicken, corn relish, and tomato, garnished with quesadilla wedges	The Cracker Barrel Sampler: chicken n' dumplings, meatloaf, and your choice of country or sugar-cured ham	Black & Bleu Caesar Salad: topped with blackened medium-rare sirloin, bacon, and crumbled bleu cheese	Chicken & Gnocchi Veronese: delicate potato dumplings and sauteed chicken in a ricotta cream sauce	Alice Springs Chicken: grilled and layered with bacon, honey mustard, and mushrooms, all under a cap of melted cheese	Garlic-grilled Jumbo Shrimp: two skewers of plump marinated crustaceans, perfectly grilled	Grilled Turkey Burger: downright juicy, and seasoned with a little kick	Ribs: Fork-tender pork with a hint of smoke in vinegary-sweet sauce	Sesame Jack Chicken Strips: fried chicken pieces in a syrupy Jack Daniel's sauce, rolled in toasted sesame seeds
BIG SELLER	California Shrimp Salad	Mini Cheeseburgers	Bang-Bang Chicken and Shrimp	Chicken Crispers	Chicken n' Dumplings	Southern Fried Chicken Salad	Chicken Alfredo	Center-cut sirloin	King crab legs	Whiskey River BBQ Burger	6-ounce sirloin	Jack Daniel's Chicken & Shrimp
ULTIMATE UMBRELLA DRINK	Applebee's Mudslide: ice cream, Kahlua, and chocolate syrup	Cheeseburger in Paradise Cocktail: frozen layers of various cocktails, with fruit, juices, and Blue Curacao	Flying Gorilla: ice cream, bananas, chocolate syrup, creme de cacao, and banana liqueur	Tropical Sunrise Margarita: colored with melon liqueur and grenadine	Frozen Mug Apple Cider: the name pretty much says it all	Wabo-rita: classic margarita with green salt on the rim	Limoncello Lemonade: frozen lemonade, citrus vodka, limoncello liqueur, sugared rim	Pineapple Chipotle Margarita: margarita with pineapple chunks and pineapple-chipotle syrup	Sunset Passion Colada: frozen piña colada topped with strawberry sauce	Sand in Your Shorts: Chambord, vodka, peach schnapps, Midori, triple sec, orange and cranberry juices, with a splash of Malibu rum	Armadillo Punch: orange, pineapple, and cranberry juices, with a splash of Malibu rum	Ultimate Mango Mai Tai: Captain Morgan and Malibu rums with fresh tropical juices

*As determined by *Men's Health*, for its 2,900 calories and 182 grams of fat.

Eateries such as The Cheesecake Factory at the Fashion Mall sometimes even fill the role of anchor—once exclusively reserved for department stores. “They have a big balance sheet behind them, and they can stand behind the lease in good times and bad,” says Steve Delaney, a real-estate broker based in Indy who has helped scout locations for Olive Garden and Red Lobster. “A developer likes to see the budget of national restaurant chains. That enhances the entire project.”

What's more, the city's restaurant economy seems somewhat immune to the slowdown that has plagued other Midwest cities such as Detroit. Although real-estate sources at several chains say sales in Indy have softened somewhat along with the broader industry, unlike in some other markets, there have been few closings here. “We're the shiny buckle in the Rust Belt,” says Roland Dorson, president of the Greater Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce. “We've grown in population while other communities in the Midwest are shrinking. You're talking about a more-prosperous city than some of our counterpart cities. As goes population growth, so go retailers.”

There are more subtle factors working in favor of the chains as well. Central Indiana has a long history as an experimental market for corporate businesses of every stripe, serving as a litmus test for





HOUSE SALAD

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1. The Cheesecake Factory
It's easy to overlook a simply described "tossed green salad" in a book-sized menu, but this one goes beyond simplicity, with cucumber strings, chopped beets, and chunks of fresh zucchini.

2. Cheeseburger in Paradise
Piled with cucumbers, crunchy wontons, and steamed asparagus, it's well worth the extra \$2.29 with your entree. Not paradise, but close.

3. Olive Garden
Served in a big glass bowl with metal tongs, this family-style salad stands out as an icon among pre-meal roughage, even though there's nothing unusual about the ingredients. Maybe we just appreciate the free refills.

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HALL OF FAME



everything from new store formats for Sears to McDonald's prototype McCafe restaurant. "We're a good test market to see if something is going to work across the country," says John Livengood, president of the Indiana Restaurant Association.

"We're very affordable, and we have a propensity to eat out quite a bit. We're an especially good place to do that."

Taxes and wages also play a part in the success of chain restaurants. The state has managed to keep its minimum wage close to the \$5.85-an-hour threshold set by the federal government, which attracts dining establishments that might balk at setting up shop in California, where it's \$8. Indiana also has a tip credit, allowing restaurants to pay waitstaff and others earning gratuities a rate of \$2.13 an hour, letting their tips make up the balance of the hourly minimum. And so far, our city has declined to levy a high restaurant tax as some others have.

Says Livengood: "It's just a very WASPish, typically American, white middle-class town."

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Perhaps no one understands the pros and cons of running chain restaurants in Indy quite as well as Mike DeWeese. In 1996, disillusioned with corporate life as a district sales manager for a Coca-Cola bottler, DeWeese, then 27, raised \$475,000, including \$25,000 in franchise fees, to open his first Buffalo Wild Wings Grill & Bar (then called BW-3) north of the city. "It was a pretty simple concept, which is why I think it did well," he says. Anchored by

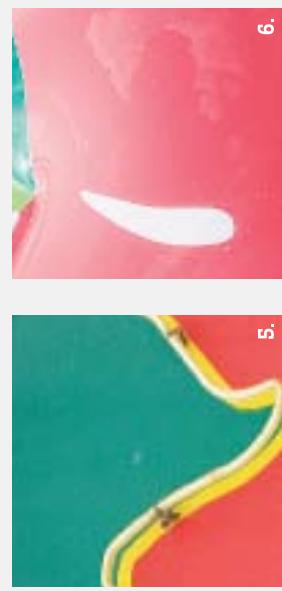
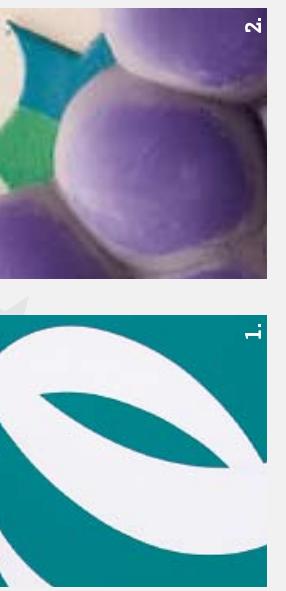
CHAIN TEASER

How well do you know your chain restaurants? Take this quiz to find out.

WILLIE NELSON PHOTO COURTESY TEXAS ROADHOUSE; GUY FIERI PHOTO BY ALEJANDRO R. TORRES, SOUND IDEAS ADVERTISING; JOHN MADDEN, WANDA SYKES, TYLER FLORENCE & JEMMAINE CLEMENT PHOTOS COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION, INC.

★ I SAW THE SIGN ★

Match the sign with the corresponding restaurant.



★ HEAD GAME ★

Which celeb-representative pitched which chain?



1. Which local independent restaurant began as a chain concept?
a. Peterson's
b. Loon Lake Lodge
c. Bubba's Pizza
d. Rick's Cafe Bistro
e. Plump's Last Shot
2. Which chain restaurant was launched in 1972?
a. Max & Erma's
b. Ruby Tuesday
c. Houlihan's
d. All of the above
3. Which of the following is not an item on the children's menu at Outback Steakhouse?
a. Kookaburra Chicken Fingers
b. Boomerang Cheese Burger
c. Mac-A-Roo N' Cheese
d. Spotted Dog Sundae
e. Barbie's Malibu Shrimp

★ U CHOOSE ★

- a. Chili's
b. T.G.I. Friday's
c. Texas Roadhouse
d. Outback
e. Applebee's
f. Ruby Tuesday
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