

THE CULINARY KINGS OF WEST MICHIGAN

How Fifth Third Ballpark has become a hotbed for new and exciting food offerings

By Ben Chiswick



Once upon a time, fans headed to the ballpark thinking about peanuts and cracker jacks. Maybe a hot dog and a beer.

But while some people like to stick to the status quo, others prefer to push the envelope.

Hungry fans at Fifth Third Ballpark will tell you that when it comes to the timeless marriage of food and baseball, the West Michigan Whitecaps are ahead of the pack. Known for their unique and creative ability to spice up the concession stands, the Whitecaps have emerged as trendsetters when it comes to salivating snacks and tantalizing tastes.

“Food has always been a big part of the experience here,” said Whitecaps’ President Scott Lane. “Part of it is making sure fans enjoy their food while they enjoy the ballgame, and part of it is keeping people guessing what we’re going to come up with next.”

In preparation for the 2010 season, Whitecaps fans were given the opportunity to do more than just guess. The team enlisted their feasting faithful to suggest what new food item they wanted to see added to the concessions menu. After whittling down the lengthy list of creative entries to 10 finalists, fans were empowered once again to vote for a winner.

The results? Too close to call.

Nearly 25,000 votes poured in and two options stood out. In fact, only two votes separated the most sought-after new menu items. But did the Whitecaps call for a recount to confirm the winner? Of course not. They decided to add both delectable delicacies to the Fifth Third Ballpark lineup in 2010.

The winner by just two votes was an unexpected regional dish from the Upper Peninsula called the Cudighi Yooper Sandwich. Less recognizable to Michiganders from the Lower Peninsula, any self respecting Yooper can tell you this delicious concoction consists of a spicy sausage patty smothered in cheese, pizza sauce, peppers and onions.

The other winner was a glorious combination of two time-tested favorites. What do you get when you cross a hot dog with a cheese steak? The Declaration of Indigestion, which happens to be the perfect way to proclaim your steadfast support for the right to artery-clogging goodness. Picture a half-pound, foot-long hot dog that is covered in a classic Philly Cheese Steak – sliced steak, grilled peppers and onions, melted Philly cheese – and served on a giant sub roll. Now picture it in front of you. You may continue to salivate.

The Cudighi Yooper Sandwich and the Declaration of Indigestion may be the latest attention-getting food items at Fifth Third Ballpark, but they are hardly the first.

The Whitecaps’ reputation as an innovator in the realm of concessions dates back to the team’s inception in 1994. In addition to the standard ballpark fare that fans are accustomed to finding at venues across the country, the team’s management was eager to try new items and let the fans decide whether they should stay or go.

Before Lane helped the start-up franchise in West Michigan he worked for the Kane



The Declaration of Indigestion (above) and the Cudighi Yooper Sandwich (below) finished in a virtual tie in the fan voting.



Ten food items were chosen for fans to vote on (below).



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County Cougars in suburban Chicago. The center-cut pork chop that he found so successful with Kane County made the trip with him to Grand Rapids and quickly took on a life of its own.

“Our fans started referring to the sandwich as the ‘Swimmin’ Pig,’” Lane recalled. “The concession workers would ask them if they wanted it plain or ‘swimming’ in barbecue sauce and the name caught on.”

Not only did the concession item prove to be a hit with taste buds, but its success spread to the promotional realm and eventually inspired Franky the Swimmin’ Pig, the popular mascot that entertains fans on a nightly basis at Fifth Third Ballpark.

But the Swimmin’ Pig was only the tip of the iceberg. Other unique concession items that have been happily devoured at Whitecaps games over the years include deep fried Pepsi, deep fried Pop Tarts, giant turkey drumsticks, gyros, apple cider floats, and a mashed potato bar. Dippin’ Dots, now a staple at venues across the country, were first made available to the West Michigan market at – where else – Fifth Third Ballpark. The team has even created their own version of relish called “Shreddies,” an original creation of shredded pickles that only local fans have the opportunity to sample.

As the Whitecaps’ primary food supplier, Gordon Food Service hosts an annual “food cutting” where they cook up a variety of mouth-watering new ideas for the team to consider for the upcoming season. When this tradition began, six or so members from the team’s front office would participate in the tasting to determine any of the new items could be successful at the ballpark. These days the tasting has turned into a full-fledged event, with upwards of 50 people attending the festivities and enjoying the tables of treats vying for the chance to be the next menu item at Fifth Third Ballpark.

For Director of Food and Beverage Matt Timon, the Whitecaps’ adventurous culinary philosophy makes life a little more challenging.

“It’s fun because we offer our fans something different every year,” said Timon. “Our menu has more variety than a lot of major league clubs out there. Just in the ice cream category, for example, fans can choose between Dippin’ Dots, Hudsonville scoop ice cream, soft serve, fried ice cream, sundaes, novelty ice cream, and root beer floats.”

While the club has a long history of creative food offerings, however, the menu item that brought international attention and put them in the national spotlight was unveiled just last season. After a brainstorming meeting between marketing executives from the Whitecaps and Fifth Third Bank, the team set out to incorporate one of their closest partners into their quest for culinary creativity.

They subsequently made a splash with the Fifth Third Burger, a 4,800-calorie creation of colossal proportions that captivated food lovers nationwide. Featuring five 1/3-pound patties of beef, the one-of-a-kind burger is layered with hearty portions of American cheese, chili,

The Cudighi Yooper Sandwich and the Declaration of Indigestion are not the only new food items that will be served at Fifth Third Ballpark in 2010. Below is a list of all the new concession items this season, as well as where in the ballpark you can find them!

Item	Location
Cudighi Yooper Sandwich	Chicago Cart at Home Plate
Italian Grinder	Chicago Cart at Home Plate
Texas Steak Nachos	Texas Chuckwagon Cart at Home Plate
Declaration of Indigestion	Texas Chuckwagon Cart at Home Plate
Hudsonville Ice Cream	Ice Cream Stand outside of 3rd Base Concession Stand
J&J Snacks Funnel Fries	Outside Ice Cream Stand on 1st Base Concourse
Fried Ice Cream	Ice Cream Stand on 1st Base Concourse
Eli's Chocolate Covered Cheesecake	3rd & 1st Base Ice Cream Carts, 1st & 3rd Base Concession Stands
Cole's Garlic & Cheese Breadsticks	Pizza Cart
Sharkwater Tropical Liqueur	Tiki Hut
Pork BBQ Dinner w/ Choice of Two Sides	Sweet Meats
Chix BBQ Dinner w/ Choice of Two Sides	Sweet Meats
Beef BBQ Dinner w/ Choice of Two Sides	Sweet Meats
BBQ Pork Loin w/Choice of Two Sides	Sweet Meats
Potato Salad	Sweet Meats
Cole Slaw	Sweet Meats
McCain Potato Wedges	Sweet Meats
McCain Sweet Potato Fries	Sweet Meats
McCain Battered Onion Rings	Sweet Meats
Boneless Buffalo Wings	Sweet Meats
Corn Dog	Sweet Meats
Cole's Texas Toast	Sweet Meats



salsa, nacho cheese and tortilla chips, and then topped with lettuce, tomato and sour cream. It is served on an eight-inch sesame seed bun for good measure.

The sheer shock value of such a monstrous list of ingredients immediately caught people's attention. Stories detailing the new burger were aired nationally on NBC, ABC, CBS and ESPN, not to mention newspapers from across the country. One of the Whitecaps' most exhilarating moments of the season came in July with a visit from the show "Man v. Food" on the Travel Channel. In the show, host Adam Richman travels to different cities across the country in order to sample local specialties from the host city. Every episode ends with a food "challenge," and during his stop in West Michigan Richman took on the Fifth Third Burger. In addition to being featured extensively on national television, the show's stop at Fifth Third Ballpark also inspired a few hundred people to attend the ballgame simply to witness the spectacle of Richman taking on their hometown burger.

Though the Fifth Third Burger regularly feeds families of four, Richman was not the only tortured soul that dared to conquer the beast by themselves. Of the 1,948 burgers that were sold during the 2009 season, 476 individuals took on the challenge and 298 succeeded in fully devouring their meal – a "healthy" 63 percent. That's quite a success rate in a baseball world that rewards .300 hitters with All-Star appearances.

The determined fans that did finish their burgers were rewarded with a commemorative t-shirt, a photo on the Fifth Third Burger Wall of Fame and, most importantly, a story they will undoubtedly recount for ages.

But for every food item that hits it big, there are countless others that never make the cut.

"It gets interesting," said Timon, also known as the voice of reason. "Every year our staff comes up with crazy ideas for new concessions items and it's my job to make them happen. It's a fun challenge that keeps us on our toes in the food and beverage world, but sometimes we get ideas that just can't be done."

While Timon may be responsible for running the concessions operation, it is the rest of the staff that generally comes up with the wacky food ideas. Timon, on the other hand, is the one that has to either alter the ideas to make them logistically feasible or shoot them down altogether.

When the ideas for the Fifth Third Burger were first presented, suggested toppings ranged from jelly (too sweet) to pickled cactus (too sour) to SPAM (just gross). You can thank Timon for steering his coworkers to more traditional ballpark ingredients.

And when you find yourself staring at the myriad options when you get to the front of the concession line this summer, you can thank the West Michigan Whitecaps' commitment to innovation and experimentation for making your next decision so difficult. ◆



Adam Richman, host of the Travel Channel's "Man v. Food" came to Fifth Third Ballpark last July to take on the Fifth Third Burger.

FAT TUESDAYS

In addition to offering unique food items, the Whitecaps are also introducing a new ticket-and-food combo in 2010. Every Tuesday, except for June 1, the team is offering a robust food package that offers fans a ticket as well as all-you-can-eat hot dogs, fries, chips and cheese, and soda. The "Fat Tuesday" package is just \$15 for adults and \$10 for kids, providing an unparalleled value for baseball, food and fun!