

Meat market

Hot diggity dog! It's wiener season – and Chicago's the place to get yourfill

By [Danielle Braff](#) and [For Redeye](#)

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Fire up those grills: It's prime hot dog season.

July just happens to be the National Hot Dog Month, and 10 percent of all annual retail hot dog sales occur during these 31 days, according to the National Hot Dog & Sausage Council. Americans are estimated to have consumed 150 million hot dogs on July 4th alone, according to the council.

Hot dog season, according to the council, runs from Memorial Day to Labor Day – and sees \$614 million in hot dog sales, the council said. During that time, Americans consume 7 billion dogs – that's 818 hot dogs per second.

With three major hot dog brands based in this city – Kraft's Oscar Mayer, Sara Lee's Ball Park and Vienna Beef – Chicagoans take their hot dogs seriously.

Margaret Schumaker, 28, says she eats hot dogs and sausages more than she eats chicken, turkey or fish, making them nearly a weekly staple at her home.

"They're also a perfect summer food," the Logan Square resident told RedEye.

Schumaker is not alone in her love for dogs. Last year, U.S. consumers bought more than 1.5 billion pounds of hot dogs and sausages in supermarkets (\$4.1 billion worth), according to the hot dog council. And consumers are spending \$1 billion less on hot dogs than they did five years ago, according to the Information Resources Inc., a Chicago-based market research firm.

Competition between Chicago's big three hot dog-makers recently heated up after Oscar Mayer gave its signature hot dog a makeover in an attempt to grab fans away from Sara Lee's Ball Park Franks.

Both suburban Chicago food manufacturers claim the designation as the nation's top hot dog brand, based on separate readings of market research and sales data.

Experts say the frank fight may become more difficult as the economy sours and hot dog consumption – at least among adults – hits its lowest level since the mid-1980s.

Kraft hopes its reformulation – its first in 20 years for the all-beef hot dog – and a massive promotional campaign attract new customers and their palates with a zestier, meatier recipe.

Becky Murcuri, author of "Great American Hot Dog Book," said today's competition is similar to the one in 1920, when hot dog vendors were figuring out exactly what to do to seduce consumers.

"Greek and Italian vendors would load up their carts with different condiments to differentiate themselves from each other," Murcuri said. It's believed that the Chicago-style dog – a steamed or boiled all-beef dog on a poppy seed bun with mustard, onions, relish, a dill pickle spear, tomatoes, peppers and absolutely no ketchup – was born after the vendors threw more and more toppings in an attempt to one-up one another, Murcuri said.

Janet Riley, president of the National Hot Dog & Sausage Council in Washington, said hot dog manufacturers will have to be very careful when reinventing their product, because most people – especially in Chicago – stick to the dog they ate as a child.

"It goes back to the memories," said Riley, a Chicago native. "People so strongly associate the hot dogs with their home, and just like people are loyal to their hometown team, they're also loyal to their hot dogs."

While Doug Sohn, owner and chef of the super-popular Hot Doug's in Avondale, offers specials such as a game of the week hot dog, he said most of his customers stick to the basic Chicago-style dog.

"It's sorta like the perfect dish," Sohn said of the Chicago dog.

But the perfect Chicago dish is hard to come by once you leave the Windy City, said Kevin Sherfinski and Mitch Kite, co-owners of hotdogchicagostyle.com, a Web site dedicated to reviewing and discussing hot dogs.

Sherfinski and Kite live in Madison, Wisc., now, but they are always on the hunt for Chicago-style dogs. They make twice-annual trips back here to fill upon dogs; each day the pair estimate they try 10 to 15 hot dog places.

"I kinda fell in love with those dogs," said Sherfinski, who grew up in Wisconsin but went to college in Chicago. "It's not so much the dog – it's the whole package," he said.

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