

Group relishes Chicago hot dogs

The first great Madison-Chicago Hot Dog Summit was held at noon Wednesday, and right away, one of the participants, Paul Soglin, former mayor of Madison, was singing the praises

of a Chicago-area joint called Poochie's.

"When your teeth go into the dog," Soglin said, "there is this explosion of flavor. I haven't asked, but my guess is they're never frozen."

DOUG MOE



Soglin grew up in Chicago and is probably Madison's best-known aficionado of the Chicago-style hot dog.

The other summit participants were Mitch Kite and Kevin Sherfinski, local software engineers with Chicago ties who operate the Web site *hotdogchicagostyle.com*.

The ostensible reason for the summit was for Soglin to try the Chicago hot dog at Signature Deli, which opened on Junction Road in Madison in August and greatly impressed Kite and Sherfinski. But what transpired Wednesday was a spirited conversation about the merit or lack of merit of a variety of hot dogs served in Chicago and Madison and a few places in between.

Few foods inspire as much passion as the Chicago hot dog, which for purists is served only one way: steamed, with yellow mustard, green relish, chopped onions, tomato wedges, a pickle spear, sport peppers and celery salt on a steamed poppy-seed bun.

Ketchup is forbidden. When a reader once asked Mike Royko, the late Chicago columnist, why it was wrong to put ketchup on a Chicago hot dog, Royko replied: "It is wrong because it is not right."

Kite said his uncle ran a hot dog place on State Street in Madison during the 1970s, but closed it after people kept asking for mayonnaise.

"He said he'd rather shut it down than serve dogs with mayo," Kite said.

When Soglin touted Poochie's, which is in Skokie, Kite smiled. "I love that place. I used to go there when I was a kid."

Kite grew up in the Chicago area. His buddy Sherfinski relocated to Chicago for college. They started their Web site



Photo by Jeanan Yasiri

Mitch Kite (left) and Kevin Sherfinski, who operate a Chicago hot dog Web site, watch as former Madison Mayor Paul Soglin bites into a Chicago dog Wednesday at Signature Deli on Junction Road.

in 2005, mainly to try to identify a good Chicago dog in Madison, but their scope since has grown.

"When I was a kid in Chicago," Soglin said, "I went to place called Carl's on the south side. It was 25 cents for a hot dog, and that included the fries. I just found out Carl's is still there, across the street and down a few blocks."

Signature Deli, the new Madison place, only serves Chicago hot dogs on Wednesdays. Mitch and Kevin had given the dog five stars.

"Our dogs were FANTASTIC," they wrote. "The natural cased dog was thick, juicy and tasted great."

Soglin is a tougher critic. On his *waxingamerica.com* blog, he recently gave Coconate's — a cart at Johnson and Charter, and a favorite of Mitch and Kevin — a grade of B. "Of course," Soglin said, "no place outside Chicago can get higher than a B-plus."

At Signature Deli, Soglin got his dog first. He'd ordered it with everything but peppers. "I don't want to be rude, but" he said, and before anyone could say anything he had taken an impressive bite. Soglin was not immediately impressed

with the dog's flavor, but a moment later he praised the condiments, especially the onions. "It's a dog worth driving to the Far West Side for," he said. His grade: C-plus.

Kite and Sherfinski stuck to their guns, reiterating their five-star rating.

Soglin recalled that the best Chicago dog he's ever eaten in Madison was decades ago at a place called Abe's, off State, where Pizzeria Uno is now.

Of course, it wasn't Poochie's.

"Poochie's is clearly an A," Soglin said. And with that, he pulled out his cell phone and punched in some numbers.

"We're having a discussion," Soglin said into his phone, a moment later. "Do you guys serve your dogs fresh, never frozen?"

A guy named Jim Burns, who identified himself as "one of the professionals" at Poochie's, confirmed they're served fresh. "And with tender loving care."

Soglin hung up. He chewed the last bite of his Signature Deli dog. "I'm off to a doctor's appointment," he said, and grinned. "No blood work today."

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