



THE STORY OF THE SANDWICH

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Would you believe that Americans eat more than 300 million sandwiches a day? That's right, every day we consume about as many sandwiches as we have people to eat them. And why not? The sandwich might be the perfect food: portable, open to any interpretation and as simple or as elaborate as the mood permits. The sandwich has a long history, but it hasn't always been as embraced in America as it is now. It's hard to imagine, but the sandwich was once thought of as a symbol of a colonial past that most patriotic Americans wanted to forget.

The sandwich as we know it was popularized in England in 1762 by John Montagu, the 4th Earl of Sandwich. Legend has it, and most food historians agree, that Montagu had a substantial gambling problem that led him to spend hours on end at the card table. During a particularly long binge, he asked the house cook to bring him something he could eat without getting up from his seat, and the sandwich was born. Montagu enjoyed his meat and bread so much that he ate it constantly, and as the concoction grew popular in London society circles it also took on the Earl's name.

Of course, John Montagu (or rather, his nameless cook) was hardly the first person to think of putting fillings between slices of bread. In fact, we know exactly where Montagu first got the idea for his creation. Montagu traveled abroad to the Mediterranean, where Turkish and Greek mezze platters were served. Dips, cheeses, and meats were all “sandwiched” between and on layers of bread. In all likelihood Montagu took inspiration from these when he sat at that card table.

Montagu’s creation took off immediately. Just a few months later, a man named Edward Gibbon mentioned the sandwich by name in a diary entry, writing that he’d seen “twenty or thirty of the first men of the kingdom” in a restaurant eating them. By the Revolutionary War, the sandwich was well established in England. You would expect American colonists to have taken to the sandwich as well, but there’s no early written record of them in the new country at all, until a sandwich recipe didn’t appear in an American cookbook until 1815.

Why would this creation go unsung in the nation for so long? It seems early American cooks tended to avoid culinary trends from their former ruling state. And the name “sandwich” itself comes from the British peerage system, something that most Americans wanted to forget. Once memory faded and the sandwich appeared, the most popular version wasn’t ham or turkey, but tongue!

Of course, most Americans today wouldn’t dream of eating a tongue sandwich. But that’s ok, since we’ve come up with some pretty excellent sandwich ideas since then. That iconic New Orleans sandwich, the Po’ Boy, came about in the Great Depression during a streetcar worker strike. Two brothers, once streetcar operators themselves, owned a sandwich shop nearby, and promised to feed any down-on-his-luck striking worker for free. When a hungry striker walked into the shop, the clerks

would yell, "Here comes another po' boy," and the name stuck. That school lunch staple, the Sloppy Joe, came about at around the same time, the innovation of a short order diner cooked named – you guessed it – Joe. And the Reuben, that decidedly un-Kosher treat of corned beef, Swiss cheese, and sauerkraut, appeared not in a New York City deli but in Omaha, Nebraska. Named after one of the participants in a weekly poker game that took place in a hotel, the creation really took off when the hotel owner featured it on the dinner menu. It later won a nationwide recipe contest, and the rest is history.

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