



Commentary: Has Primanti Bros. lost its gritty charm?

'Almost Famous' sandwiches with fries and coleslaw on top are hard to hold — and give away



SONO MOTOYAMA 
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
smotoyama@post-gazette.com 

DEC 1, 2024

5:30 AM

If journalists and frat boys are financial bellwethers, Primanti Bros. might be in trouble.

To write about Pittsburgh’s famous “Almost Famous” sandwich, I offered any Primanti’s enthusiast in the newsroom and at a University of Pittsburgh fraternity house a free lunch.

I got exactly zero respondents.

Now, I admit that, in this unscientific survey, I did not control for other possible factors, such as the (lack of) appeal for a fraternity member to serve as source material for a middle-aged female scribbler (me). Nonetheless, in my experience, neither reporters nor frat boys are notably discriminating when it comes to food, nor are they likely to turn down free access to it.

Especially food piled high, as it is in the signature Primanti's sandwich — white bread stuffed with meat, cheese, tomatoes and, crucially, coleslaw and french fries.

Yet, in its 91st year, Primanti Bros. is continuing to expand its reach, having opened [its 43rd location](#) in June, in the Baltimore area. It currently has tentacles in Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Florida and Maryland. The most recent restaurant weighed in at 5,227 square feet, which is probably 10 times the size of the original Primanti's in the Strip District, founded in 1933.



Toni Haggerty has worked at Primanti's in the Strip District for more than 50 years.
(Post-Gazette)

Born in the Strip

As a newcomer to Pittsburgh, I wanted to try to get a sense of the charm that has made Primanti Bros. such a lasting brand. I'd [read](#) how the multilayered sandwich, today beloved by drinkers and stoners, was created so Depression-era truck drivers could hold a whole meal in just one hand. (Regardless of what you may have heard, [steel workers were not involved](#) in the origin story.)

With little idea of what to expect, I met a fellow recent transplant at the franchise's 18th Street location in the Strip District.

I was surprised, first of all, by the building's petite size. No *wonder* there

are lines to get in — you can’t squeeze many chowhounds into this rowhouse-sized eatery. And unlike my visit to an [Isaly’s](#), another old-timey Pittsburgh haunt, Primanti’s did not inspire any bittersweet sense of nostalgia. It just looked like a slightly grubby deli.

The sandwiches too were a disappointment. I had the pastrami with everything on it. My dining partner had the “#2 Best Seller” — the No. 1 being the beer, har-har — a cheeseburger served in the Primanti’s style.

Question



What’s your quick summary of Primanti Bros. sandwiches?

☐ An occasional treat

☐ Yes, please!

☐ No, never, nope

* By clicking "NEXT" I submit my answers and consent to the use of cookies for research and advertising purposes; I have read and agree to the [CivicScience Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#)

NEXT *

As a fan of the pastrami at [Katz’s Deli](#) on New York’s Lower East Side (I think I even have a Katz’s T-shirt somewhere), I have just one word to say to Primanti’s pastrami: no.

The hamburger wasn’t any better. My guest explained that he was frantically dipping his sandwich in the lake of ketchup on his plate to give it some flavor.

Leaving aside the quality of the meat, the sandwiches could have been hugely improved with just a few upgrades. The flabby white bread (which, despite another Primanti’s myth, is *not* from [Mancini’s Bakery](#), another iconic Pittsburgh brand) could not stand up to the pressure needed to grip and eat such a fat sandwich.

This was even more apparent the next day when I went to finish leftovers I’d brought home. Because of the state of the bread, the sandwich looked like it had been mangled by wild animals and then stepped on. It ended up in the trash. (And I’m a cheapskate who doesn’t like to throw away even barely edible food.)

Then, the fries. Limp and sodden, though, yes, piled on generously, they were simply a layer of potatoes on top of the other layers. If you're calling them fries, they should be crispy.

And you know who does both of these elements better than Primanti Bros. in a similar sandwich? Europeans. (I'm bracing for the hate mail! Bring it on!)

Le sandwich américain

Long before I'd heard a whisper of Primanti Bros., I knew of "American sandwiches" and [kebab-frites](#) when I was living in France. "Un sandwich américain" is usually a hamburger in a crusty baguette with various toppings and fries — crisp fries — on top. There can be other versions, like one from a [restaurant in Lille](#) that has a delicious-looking sandwich with chicken tenders.



An "American sandwich" at a restaurant in Lille, France: chicken tenders in an artisanal half-baguette with lettuce, tomatoes and fried onions.
(Photo courtesy of Le Tendre)

I just recently learned, in researching this story, that the French credit the Belgians for the American sandwich. (Got that?) Belgians are the world champions of frites — they claim to have invented so-called French fries.

Belgians often call their fries-stuffed sandwich a “[mitraille](#),” or submachine gun. Go figure. But you can be sure that the sandwich, nestled in a baguette, will be topped with proper fries — or there will be hell to pay.

Still, the crickets I heard in response to my offer of a free lunch were probably not solely tied to Primanti’s (lack of) culinary appeal. Instead, the silence might signal a tinge of shame.

Though undeniably Primanti Bros. has many fans, in a Reddit thread from 13 years ago that was still active as of a month ago, one mystified poster

asked “[What’s so good about Primanti Bros.?](#)” In the thread, the restaurant chain did not have any staunch defenders that I saw. With its giant sports-bar iterations spread across the suburban landscape, Primanti Bros. is for many somewhere you go when you’re forced by your tourist friends.

The very grubbiness I noted in the Strip District spot might have been part of its earlier draw. A native Pittsburgher I spoke to recalled the days when 18th Street was one of the few Primanti’s locations, and she’d look forward to parleying with one of the “salty” waitresses.

“It was a unique experience back then,” she said.

First Published: December 1, 2024, 5:30 a.m.

Updated: December 2, 2024, 3:37 p.m.

Tags: **Iconic Eats of Western Pa.**



Sono Motoyama has been a Post-Gazette food writer since September 2024. She has written about food, health and technology for a variety of publications in the U.S. and Europe.

✉ smotoyama@post-gazette.com
🦋 sonomotoyama-pg.bsky.social