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8 Places For A True Taste Of Cleveland

by Libby Zay



Cleveland is a culinary town. From a roving army of food trucks to a collection of upscale restaurants run by Cleveland-born Iron Chef Michael Symon, this city has something to please any appetite. Drawing on the culinary traditions of immigrant groups who came to the city, there are a few foods visitors simply must try when in town. Among them are the Polish Boy, a sandwich invented in Cleveland that consists of sausage covered with fries, and Lake Erie perch, a blue-collar staple found at neighborhood bars and churches throughout the city at Friday night fish fries. Whether you are spending some time in Cleveland or just passing through, here are eight of the best places to get a meal.

Sokolowski's University Inn

Neighborhood: Tremont

Nearby Attractions: A Christmas Story House, Cleveland Zoo

Established in 1923, Sokolowski's University Inn is a cafeteria-style restaurant serving old school Polish foods. On any given day you can order up hearty servings of chicken paprikash, pierogies, stuffed cabbage, salisbury steak, bratwurst, beef stroganoff or other Eastern European dishes. Although it proves difficult, be sure to take your focus off your plate and survey Sokolowski's walls - this place is part Cleveland shrine, part history lesson.

Melt Bar and Grilled

Neighborhood: Lakewood

Nearby Attractions: Edgewater Park

Melt Bar and Grilled takes simple bread and cheese to a whole new level. The bar is known for two things: 1) an eating challenge that requires consuming a monster sandwich with 13 different cheeses and 2) giving a 25% discount (for life) to anyone who gets a tattoo of their logo (also for life). But you don't need to potentially suffer heart disease or permanently scar your body to enjoy all Melt has to offer. You will, however, probably have to wait in line for your sandwich. Still, this is one place that lives up to the hype.

Happy Dog

Neighborhood: Gordon Square Arts District

Nearby Attractions: Capitol Theatre, Cleveland public Theater, Detroit Shoreway

Five dollars might seem a little steep for a hot dog, until you realize you can smother it in as many toppings as you'd like from a list of 50. From picnic-inspired toppings like pimento macaroni and cheese, garbanzo bean chili and bourbon baked beans to more exotic selections, like garlicky escarole, Brazilian chimichurri and vegetable chow mein, the combinations are limitless. Whip up your own concoction or use Happy Dog's list of "suggestive weiners," but whatever you do don't miss out on a side order of tater tots (also with limitless toppings). As for the ambiance, Happy Dog is a true neighborhood spot with stools lining an oval wood bar. From polka to punk rock, this place has live music most nights, more than 75 beers, and an additional downstairs bar with pinball machines and shuffleboard.

Corky & Lenny's

Neighborhood: Woodmere Village

Nearby Attractions: Bridges to the Future Children's Museum, University Circle, Little Italy

This family-owned deli has been serving up overstuffed corned beef and pastrami sandwiches, potato pancakes, lox and bagels, matzo ball soup, kosher pickles and other Jewish favorites for more than 55 years. Some patrons liken Corky & Lenny's to a New York-style deli, but ordering up a sandwich from this place is an authentic Cleveland experience. Give it a shot, and you might discover a new Jewish deli to compare all other Jewish delis to.



Trattoria on the Hill

Neighborhood: Little Italy

Nearby Attractions: The Cleveland Museum of Art and Cleveland Museum of Natural History
Lined with art galleries, churches, bakeries, pizzerias and restaurants, Cleveland's Little Italy consistently ranks high amongst Italian enclaves across the nation. There's a lot of competition along Little Italy's main drag, Mayfield Road, but Trattoria on the Hill is a standout. The secret here seems to be in their sauce: get it over pasta, on pizza, or over eggplant and you won't be disappointed. Nearby to Little Italy is University Circle, where you'll find many world class museums – among them The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland Botanical Garden, Cleveland Museum of Natural History and the Crawford Auto Aviation Museum.

Slyman's Deli

Neighborhood: Goodrich - Kirtland Park

Nearby Attractions: Rock & Roll Hall of Fame & Museum, Cleveland Science Center

This always popular diner has been voted as the best place to get a corned beef sandwich by a number of local and national outlets, including accolades from Esquire magazine and Rachael Ray. Although Slyman's menu does include things other than corned beef, roast beef and pastrami, there's no reason for you to look beyond these mile-high sandwiches. Just don't try to stop in on the weekends, cause this place is closed Saturdays and Sundays.

Tommy's Restaurant

Neighborhood: Coventry Village

Nearby Attractions: Lake View Cemetery, Little Italy

When Tommy Fello opened up a soda fountain in the 1970s, it was a one man show: he took the orders, made the food, cashed people out and washed the dishes. As regulars started coming in and making up their own sandwiches, Tommy jotted down their names or initials. As the restaurant grew, this is how the menu took shape – each item is named after its creator. Today, the menu is 21 pages long with sandwiches, pizzas, salads and soups, as well as the shakes and malts that helped Tommy make his mark. While there, take some time to stroll around Coventry Village, Cleveland's version of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury with book stores, a rock club, a retro toy store, a record store, taverns and Phoenix Coffee, a local coffeehouse.

Great Lakes Brewing Company

Neighborhood: Ohio City

Nearby Attractions: West Side Market, Playhouse Square

Great Lakes Brewing Company has pushed their suds into 13 neighboring states, but the best place to knock one back is in their hometown. Luckily, the company's namesake brewpub is

also the perfect place to get a taste of Cleveland. From bratwurst and pierogi to reubens, each of the menu options are paired with one of the company's brews.