

Life in the Valley

Chowing down with Salem's competitive eating champ



Statesman Journal reporters, from left, state government reporter Ben Botkin, breaking new reporter Virginia Barreda, photojournalist Anna Reed and food and drink reporter Emily Teel go up against competitive eater "Max Carnage" during a Statesman Journal eating challenge to finish the Dark Knight Burger, consisting of six top-selling burgers, at Heroes Tap House in Salem on March 22, 2019. The Statesman Journal crew finished the stack in 35 minutes. BELINDA HIGHTOWER / SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

Emily Teel
Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Ryan Rodacker has a regular day job as a janitor at the Oregon State Hospital, but his alter ego, Max Carnage, has a second life. Carnage is the ring-leader of the Salem-based Big Eaters Club, a group of friends who tackle eating challenges.

"We are ordinary people doing extraordinary things that test the limits of our physical capabilities and highlight the amazing food that is all around us."

The most notable competitive eater in the area, Carnage holds the records for challenges all over the Salem area. He posts video of his attempts on the Big Eaters Club YouTube channel and even consults with business owners in developing challenges of their own.

In March, Carnage agreed to tackle a volume challenge in competition with a group of four Statesman Journal staffers. Beforehand, we asked him a few questions to better understand what we had signed up for.

ET: How did you get into this to begin with?

RR: Six or so years ago my then girlfriend and I went on a vacation at the coast, an eat-stay-play combo. Come back, step on a scale, and I'm a couple of M&Ms away from 300 pounds. I'm like ok, I gotta do something about this. I went on a six month diet of white rice, chicken breast, broccoli, a little bit of peanut butter occasionally. Six months later, 75 pounds is gone.

ET: Wow

RR: After six months of eating that I thought, man, I'm craving a burger. I'd always been a fan of Man vs. Food and watched the Nathan's hot dog eating contest, so I went and found a burger challenge...The first time I ever did it, I had 45 minutes...it took me 36 minutes.

ET: So you had natural talent?

RR: BEST burger I've ever had, best burger I've ever had. So I go back on the diet. A couple of weeks later I said, man, I'm craving a pizza. Do it again. One thing leads to another, and I kind of get into it. The free food gets me, the cash gets me, the prizes get me. I don't really much care about the t-shirts, they're sitting in a giant tote right now.

ET: Sure

RR: But the food, getting to go to new places first got me into it. And what I love the most...is coming to places like this...getting to meet the owners and the staff that are proud to put their effort, energy, and desire on every piece of food they bring out to you. That's what I love.

ET: So, eating challenges have offered you a way to explore?

RR: It combines the foodie that I am, the giant appetite I have and getting to



Max Carnage, winner of the Adam's Rib Smokehouse Goliath burger eating contest, finishes the final scraps of his burger while recording his progress in Salem on Saturday, March 2, 2019. MICHAELA ROMÁN / STATESMAN JOURNAL



(From left to right) Kirk Brooks, Max Carnage (first place winner), Brian Mead, Ricky Duran and Omar Hernandez pose for a photo after the Goliath Burger challenge at Adam's Rib Smokehouse in Salem on Saturday, March 2, 2019. MICHAELA ROMÁN / STATESMAN JOURNAL

find amazing, unique, interesting places...I've figured out a way to make myself the regional expert on this just because I love doing it. There's something primal about it, if you think about it. Not everybody swims, you know, not everybody plays basketball, not everybody runs, even, but everybody eats. We all can understand the appeal of an awesome looking burger. We can all under-

stand the appeal of Thanksgiving, of eating so much food that you feel like your stomach is going to explode, but just wanting one more bite.

ET: To speak to that, I've seen you put away amounts of food that don't seem to be accommodated by the human body, and yet you do. How did you learn the strategy of competitive eating?

RR: Reading, research, listening. A

lot of it is just understanding my body and how it works. When I was down to 205 pounds...I could probably put away another pound and a half to what I can now. It's the simple physics of the body.

ET: So is that why you see competitive eaters who are super small?

RR: Right. The people that do this on higher levels than me, they're chugging water...[or] eating 15,000 calories and then going to the gym and then burning 15,000 calories. That's not me. I'm not going that far. I don't want the hobby that I enjoy to become my full time job.

ET: I think of you as a professional competitive eater, but you have a day job and this is a hobby for you, correct?

RR: I just call myself a professional because I'm professional skill, professional ability, you'd be hard-pressed to find 50 people in the world better than me at this. The honest answer is that it's a hobby, I make more off of it than it costs me.

ET: Do you have strategy tips for us?

RR: Okay so the hardest thing to eat is gonna be the meat, it's gonna be the most temperature hot, it's going to be the hardest to chew, and it's going to take the most chewing to safely get down. The more dense foods, deep fried chicken strips or lunch meat, that's going to be a lot harder to eat than shredded pork. Eat the bread second if you can. And I would recommend standing. If you're standing the food can go straight down. Gravity. You'll feel jaw fatigue. At 4 or 5 minutes you're going to start feeling as though you've eaten something. Right at about 9 minutes, your stomach is going to tell your brain STOP. That's when you've got to keep going through that. If you're not familiar with that feeling, uh-oh. At minute 12 or 13, that's when you're going to start feeling physical pain. That's when you might start sweating.

ET: Uh-oh. So, what's your after-care on something like this? Like, I have to ask, do you throw up?

RR: Rarely. Very rarely. And if it's intentionally it's for safety. You can imagine putting a seven pound burger in here, right? And then if you have to drive, you could throw up driving down the road. Dangerous. At that point, it's a safety thing.

ET: What do you do to take care of yourself? To help yourself digest?

RR: Probably going to take a nap, drink some water and on the way home stop by and get a Slurpee. That really helps calm it down. It's weird, but it's a thing I've learned.

Emily Teel is the Food & Drink Editor at the Statesman Journal. Contact her at eteel@statesmanjournal.com, or via Facebook or Twitter. See what she's cooking and where she's eating this week on Instagram: [@emily_teel](https://www.instagram.com/emily_teel)