

Game Day Grub

PIGGING OUT AT CIVIC STADIUM BY JEREMY OHMES

Recently, *The New York Times* ran a story on the best and worst eats at each and every Major League Baseball ballpark. The Seattle Mariners' Safeco Field won overall top nosh, while those hoity-toity New Yorkers turned their noses up at the Chicago White Sox's entire stadium menu. Although this writer didn't agree with a lot of the judges' choices (they put ketchup on a Chicago hot dog, for Chrissakes!), there's no denying the final consensus: Ballpark food is pretty much hit or miss.

Sure, much of the chow at the ballgame is greasy, unhealthy and overpriced, but it's also an indispensable part of our American pastime. Food is woven into the fabric of the game: Buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jacks. What do you think the seventh-inning stretch is for? A day at the ballpark just isn't complete without a trip to the concession stand. So, taking a cue from the *Times*, I stepped into Civic Stadium for an Emeralds' game and gorged myself on as much ballpark grub as I could handle. Here's my culinary scorecard:



TODD COOPER

RIGHT:
Ryan Burch

LEFT: Nora Cary demonstrates the proper way to eat a Slugger dog



TODD COOPER

TOP OF THE 1st Walking through the turnstiles on the north side of the stadium, I smell the sizzling eats before I actually see them. Good sign. A smoky cartoon finger lures me toward the Main Grill and I dive right in with a Slugger dog — a char-grilled, all-beef foot-long that invites its fair share of phallic jokes. Coughing up six bucks for the hot dog hurts, but at least it comes with a side of fries. I go to the fixings bar and suit up my Slugger with some onions, mustard and relish. They've got ketchup, mayo, pickles and sauerkraut, too.

Then I grab a soda and head to the stands. Biting into the Slugger dog, I'm pleasantly surprised: good meat to bun ratio (more beef than bread) and the dog is plump and juicy with that nice grilled snap; not rubbery and not too greasy, but a little saltier than I prefer. The real sluggers, though, are the fries — thick cut, skin-on, perfectly salted and a nice full-on potato flavor. They don't even need ketchup. So far, so good. Score: 2-0

TOP OF THE 5th I hit up the concession stand located between Burrito Amigos and Prince Puckler's and order some chicken strips. Once again, they come with fries, but this time I upgrade to cheese fries. Ballsy, I know. The chicken strips look more like giant deep-fried gloves, and in fact, picking up groundballs would probably be a better use for the dry, flavorless mouth-aches anyway. I turn to the cheese fries for salvation and I immediately regret defiling them with the gelatinous, neon yellow cheese product. The "cheese" has coagulated all over my fail-safe fries like too much

makeup on a pretty face, and within minutes my fries have gone from tasty fare to inedible glop. Score: 2-2

BOTTOM OF THE 7th I go back to the trustworthy Main Grill and grab a cherry-flavored Sno-cone along the way. \$2.50 for some ice and food coloring? Gimme a break. Score: 2-3

I order a cheeseburger and the teen at the counter tells me that it'll be 10 minutes. "The burgers are still frozen." My taste buds cringe as soon as he drops the f-word. Score: 2-4

Instead, I inquire about the Oktoberfest dog. "It's like a kielbasa," he cracks. I'm sold, even though that's more Polish than German. The sausage comes with fries, and when the kid asks me if I want to add cheese, I almost want to knock the oozy topping out of his hands. Fresh off the grill, the Oktoberfest dog is dark and stout. I slather some sauerkraut and mustard on it and with the first bite, the sausage snaps like a wooden bat. There's a distinct garlic flavor to it and also a little kick, almost like a mild andouille. Juicy, seasoned and plump, it's by far the best nosh I've had all day. Final Score: 3-4

BOX With my belt loosened and my stomach feeling like Kobayashi's, I waddle out of the ballpark somewhat nauseous yet thoroughly satisfied despite the losing score. Naturally, there are a few greasy, gut-churning strikeouts, but there are also some unexpected hits. If nothing else, go to the ballgame and take comfort in the fact that you can wash your grub down with a local microbrew. See you in the hot dog line. ■

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