



he story of Papaya King, like so many of the great stories of the 20th Century, starts at the gates of Ellis Island. In 1923 Constantine "Gus" Poulos, a young immigrant from Athens, Greece arrived on these shores. He was penniless but ambitious.

Poulos soon found work in a deli, which he ended up buying a few years later. The story might have ended there and then but for a 1932 vacation to Miami and Havana, Cuba where Poulos discovered the joys of tropical fruit drinks. Upon returning home he promptly closed his deli and opened Hawaiian Tropical Drinks, New York's first juice bar. The location, on the corner of 86th Street and 3rd Ave in Manhattan, remains the flagship store of what would one day be known as Papaya King. In 1935 Poulos opened a second store in Brooklyn followed by an outpost in Upper Darby, PA in 1937. Hot dogs were added to the menu in 1939 and a New York Classic was born.

The somewhat curious addition of hot dogs was a nod the original location's Yorkville neighborhood, which was largely German and Polish at the time. It is a combination that has stood the test of time.



The Papaya King hot dog is an all beef affair in a natural casing, cooked on a flattop and served on a toasted white bun. The dog is made by Marathon Enterprises based in nearby Englewood, NJ but the recipe is unique and proprietary. Marathon also manufacture the hot dogs for the Sabrett's brand, Katz's Delicatessen, and Gray's Papaya, amongst others. A Papaya King dog topped with sauerkraut and mustard is perfectly acceptable, but the red onion sauce— a tangy tomato based concoction laced with vinegar, now ubiquitous on hot dogs in the city —was actually created specifically for Papaya King and gives you a taste of what made them unique, at least at one time. Appointed with a layer of onions, a hot dog from the Papaya King hits all of the right flavor and texture notes — the dog is heavy on the garlic with just a hint of smoke; it's pleasingly salty; and the casing provides a wonderful snap and subsequent explosion of juice revealing the undeniably beefy flavor when bitten. The sweetness from the onions helps to balance out the garlic, and the vinegar in the sauce cuts the richness of the fat. Wash it down with a viscous, frothy cup of papaya juice and you are tasting NYC history.



Like the fortunes of the city itself, those of Papaya King has ebbed and flowed, the business expanding and then constricting and expanding again in the ensuing decades. Over the years stores opened and closed in San Francisco, Miami, Baltimore and, somewhat ironically, Hawaii. The iconic neon sign that reads "PAPAYA" at the original location was erected in the 1950s but the name Papaya King was not formally adopted until the next decade. Legend has it that it was Babe Ruth who christened the chain. Inevitably imitators emerged selling similar hot dogs and tropical drinks: Papaya Heaven, Papaya Paradise, Papaya Place, Papaya Circle, Papaya World, Frank's Papaya, Papaya Jack, and Original Papaya (which was anything but) all operated at one time in NYC, serving the familiar pairing of hot dogs and tropical drinks pioneered by Poulus. They are all long gone, although we still find Mike's Papaya, Chelsea Papaya, and Papaya Dog in Manhattan. But Papaya King faces its stiffest competition from Gray's Papaya. During the early 1970s Papaya King dabbled in franchising in NYC and a non-company store opened at 2090 Broadway on the corner of 72nd Street. In 1973 owner Nicholas Gray closed his Papaya King and reopened as Gray's Papaya; the two stands have had a rivalry as fierce as that of the Mets and Yankees ever since.



A company-run store also opened in the early 1980s on 59th Street on the corner of Third Avenue, but is now closed. Gus Poulos passed away in 1988 and his son Peter Poulos and nephew Alexander Poulos continued to run the business for almost a decade before selling the rights to the Papaya King brand to a private equity firm in 1997. By this time Papaya King had been firmly established not just in culinary culture — Julia Child declared it the best hot dog in NYC — but in popular culture as well. Both Elvis and The Beatles are said to have visited, and the stand is famously featured in *Seinfeld* when a hungry Cosmo Kramer leaves the movie theater line stating "I don't want a movie hot dog, I want a Papaya King hot dog!" But if the Poulos family had proved adept at creating a classic pairing, establishing an iconic brand and maintaining the original location, they proved to be far less suited to franchising and running a chain of Papaya Kings. Founders Equity had ambitious plans for Papaya King, eyeing national expansion. They first opened a location on 125th Street in Harlem, and once again set its sights on Philadelphia, opening a store on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania in 2001; it was closed by 2004. The goal of opening 10 to 12 stores within the first two years of the new millennium never

panned out. Franchising was once again explored in 2006 with ill fated outposts in Garden City on Long Island and in the Connecticut Post Mall in Milford, CT. Units were also opened in Baltimore, New Jersey, and Miami. But all of those entities soon closed leaving only the original location in operation when Papaya King was once again sold in 2010 to Wayne Rosenbaum and an anonymous group of investors.



Wayne Rosenbaum

Rosenbaum brought almost a quarter century of catering experience as well as having

held "practically every job in the restaurant business." His main focus was on "restoring the Papaya King brand." This included hiring a design firm to modernize the logo and renovate the flagship store, while maintaining the look and feel of the original. In 2011 West Coast nightlife impresario Sam Nazarian opened a Papaya King in Los Angeles that Rosenbaum describes as a "pop -up." Although at the time Nazarian announced plans to open locations in Nevada, Arizona, and Florida, they never materialized and the Los Angeles shop shuttered in 2013. But if the franchise model didn't pan out in the West back in NYC Papaya King opened a second location in 2013 on St. Mark's Place in the East Village.

Rosenbaum expanded the menu at the new location, keeping the core products of dogs and drinks but adding items like nachos, a foot long Frank, and even a veggie burger to cater to the East Village's demographic. Rosenbaum states unequivocally that there are currently no plans to franchise Papaya King. And while he is always "looking at real estate" and concedes that he would consider "the right location," he seems more focused on expanding his catering and mobile business. Papaya King launched a food truck last year that he describes as a "store on wheels," as well as operating three hot dog carts — all festooned in the brand's distinctive yellow. It is a smart move. Real estate prices in NYC have continued to skyrocket. The plateau in prices that Founders Equity anticipated never came, stymieing their plans at opening additional locations in NYC. Rosenbaum is playing to the brands strengths and the mobility of the product. The truck can be found around town at tourist attractions such as the Intrepid and at festivals like the Governor's Ball and the Electric Zoo. It is paradoxical that modernizing the Papaya King brand involves returning to the streets, which lies at the very heart of the hot dog's origin story.

While there are still several other papaya-style hot dog stands operating in NYC, they will always only be imitators: Papaya King is the original. Long may he reign.

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