

5 iconic hot dog families celebrate Ellis Island heritage

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Nathan's Famous, Sabrett, Vienna Beef, Hebrew National, and Westchester's own Walter's Hot Dogs kick off a hot dog exhibit at Ellis Island June 28, 2017. Tania Savayan/Iohud

Five of America's most iconic hot dog families joined tongs on Wednesday to celebrate the one link they each have in common: Their founders all emigrated through Ellis Island to America.

In honor of National Hot Dog Month, the owners of Nathan's Famous, Sabrett, Vienna Beef, Hebrew National, and Westchester's own Walter's Hot Dogs joined together in a Hot Dog Summit outside of the National Museum of Immigration to celebrate the opening of an exhibit that tracks the history of each family's franks.



The Walter's Hot Dogs family from left, Christine Warrington, Gene-Christian Baca, Katharine Woodward and Christine Sand at the "Hot Dog Summit" on Ellis Island June 28, 2017. Walter's Hot Dogs, along with other national brands started by immigrant families, such as Nathan's, Hebrew National, Sabrett, and Vienna Beef were part of the special menu and historical timeline installation on the island. (Photo: Tania Savayan/The Journal News)

"Walter came over from Italy through Ellis Island in the early 1900s," said Gene-Christian Baca of Walter's Hot Dogs, whose family has operated a pagoda-style stand on Palmer Avenue in Mamaroneck for 98 years. "Being part of the Hot Dog Summit is everything to us. We were so excited to partner up with all of the other hot dog families for such a good cause."



Aislinn Macintosh, 21, Christopher Belnap, 20, and Rebecca Belnap, 13, who are visting from Utah, sample hot dogs at the "Hot Dog Summit" on Ellis Island June 28, 2017. Walter's Hot Dogs, along with other national brands started by immigrant families, such as Nathan's, Hebrew National, Sabrett, and Vienna Beef were part of the special menu and historical timeline installation on the island. *(Photo: Tania Savayan/The Journal News)*

The temporary exhibit, titled "Hot Out of the Melting Pot — A History of the Hot Dog in America" and which will run through the month of July, was produced by Evelyn Hill Inc., the food service concessionaire at the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island.

The display features photographs, fun facts and a visual timeline of how each brand's tube steaks found their way to our shores.

"Forty percent of Americans can trace their roots to Ellis Island," said Bob Uffer, general manager of Evelyn Hill Inc. and a Stony Point resident. "And there are many stories that can be told through food... One day, while having a hot dog at Walter's Hot Dog's, I started to wonder how the hot dog came to America and the idea for the Hot Dog Summit was born. Summer seemed like the perfect time to celebrate one of America's favorite foods."



Visitors sample hot dogs at the "Hot Dog Summit" on Ellis Island June 28, 2017. Walter's Hot Dogs, along with other national brands started by immigrant families, such as Nathan's, Hebrew National, Sabrett, and Vienna Beef were part of the special menu and historical timeline installation on the island. (Photo: Tania Savayan/The Journal News)

The participating hot dog royalty was equally enthusiastic to be steaming and grilling their frankfurters together in view of Lady Liberty.

"We typically don't get together [with other hot dog purveyors]," said Sean Roemig, Northeastern regional sales manager of Nathan's Famous, whose founder Nathan Handwerker, a Polish immigrant, launched a stand in Brooklyn's Coney Island in 1916. "But I think the Hot Dog Summit could have the potential to become an annual event. It's been a lot of fun so far."

The superlative franks handed out to visitors at the summit will be available on a special combination platter sold inside of the Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration cafeteria throughout the month of July.

Those skeptical that hot dogs can vary enough in taste to merit such a tasting, may be surprised what subtle variations lay between the buns.

"Sabrett are made from fresh bull beef, all domestic, trimmings and our own special spice blend that we've been using for 90-plus years," said Mark Rosen of Sabrett, which was

founded in 1926 and owned by Gregory Papalexis until his passing in 2011. His company, Marathon Enterprises, is still run by his family out of Englewood, New Jersey. "The garlic and the spices make it special and unique."



Scott Ladany, the grandson of Vienna Beef founder, at the "Hot Dog Summit" on Ellis Island June 28, 2017. Walter's Hot Dogs, along with other national brands started by immigrant families, such as Nathan's, Hebrew National, Sabrett, and Vienna Beef were part of the special menu and historical timeline installation on the island. (Photo: Tania Savayan/The Journal News)

The Vienna Beef hot dog, created by Austrian-Hungarian immigrants Emil Reichel and Sam Ladany, has been wooing frankfurter lovers in the Windy City since 1893 with its own idiosyncratic ingredient: Celery salt.

"That's the secret! Now we have to kill you," joked Scott Ladany, vice president of sales for the Vienna Beef company, and the founder's grandson.



Hebrew National hot dogs at the "Hot Dog Summit" on Ellis Island June 28, 2017. Walter's Hot Dogs, along with other national brands started by immigrant families, such as Nathan's, Hebrew National, Sabrett, and Vienna Beef were part of the special menu and historical timeline installation on the island. (Photo: Tania Savayan/The Journal News)

Hebrew National was founded by Isadore Pinkowitz, who emigrated from Romania in the 1880s and opened his sausage factory in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 1905.

In recent years, the company relocated its headquarters to Quincy, Michigan, but representatives felt right at home being back in the Big Apple serving their signature dogs.

"It's a great kosher product, using 100 percent kosher beef, as we have since the beginning," said Cameron J. Cimale, manager of category marketing at ConAgra, which purchased Hebrew National 20 years ago.

Meanwhile, Walter's hot dogs are made from a blend of beef, pork and veal, split down the middle, grilled in a "secret sauce," and served on a toasted bun with Walter's proprietary mustard: A blend of mustard seeds, relish and spices, noted Baca.

With Independence Day right around the corner, all agreed it was a perfect time to celebrate the food's history by firing up a few bangers on the grill.

"It's a fun way for families to experience Ellis Island," said Uffer. "How could it not be? It's hot dogs!"