

FOOD & DRINK

EATING OUT | By Raymond Sokolov

Taste-Testing New York Baseball

Lobster rolls at Citi Field take on cheese steaks at Yankee Stadium

New York

On chilly Wednesday night at spanking new Citi Field, José Reyes scored from first base for the home team in a comical Padres screwup, and the Mets beat the San Diego Padres 7-2. But some of the best action was in the stands, in the open-air food court called Taste of the City.

Both local teams lost the openers at their new stadiums—the Mets to the Padres on Monday 6-5, and the Yankees to Cleveland on Thursday 10-2—but they scored points with their efforts to give New

York baseball fans a lot more than franks and beer to feed themselves and their loyalty.

Like the Mets, the Yankees have devoted vast space to a vastly improved string of food purveyors in an area with a full view of the diamond. And like those at Citi Field, many of the stalls at the new Yankee Sta-

dium are operated by trademark restaurateurs and food-service veterans with local or national reputations for quality. Mike's Deli, of the nearby Italian enclave on Arthur Avenue, is bringing fresh mozzarella and zeppoli. Johnny Rockets gives the discriminating Yank ticketholder a sample of the charbroiled cheeseburger that has made the restaurant chain's name.

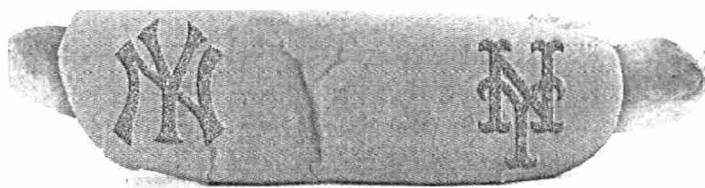
With the Mets picked to go all the way this year by Sports Illustrated, and the Yankees' being a team, as my father the Detroit Tiger fan told me, that you should never bet against, New Yorkers can once again start nursing hopes for a subway series in October. But right now, the inquiring palate can conduct another kind of subway series, a gastronomic matchup of the improved food offerings at the two new ballparks. Here is my box score, based on taste

comparisons conducted on the spot at Citi Field and Yankee Stadium.

For this battle of the food halls, I am deliberately excluding elite restaurants and facilities open only to VIP ticketholders, although it should be said that the dramatically glassed-in Acela Club in left field at Citi, overseen by local restaurant genius Drew Nieporent, raises the bar for all sports-arena food anywhere. Its \$48 prix fixe, featuring hors d'oeuvres and selections such as heritage pork with world-class sauerkraut (a top-drawer take on the New York hot dog) or lavishly crab-filled crab cakes with cauliflower-tomato chutney, is top value. But today's food fight is about stadium fodder available to all fans.

So what's the official box score? We totaled up the runs column and declare Citi Field the winner. But the struggle will continue, at least until the end of the regular season. Some New Yorkers are complaining about high ticket prices at the new stadiums and the multimillion-dollar public subsidies for their construction. But the radical improvement in the food service, no matter which team's concessions you prefer, now puts Big Apple teams on a competitive culinary footing with the Boston Red Sox.

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Photoillustration: Patrick Conlon/The Wall Street Journal



Dogs

▲ **Citi Field's** top frank is the "Shack-ago" dog at Shake Shack, an outpost of the incredibly popular Manhattan apotheosis of American counter food, from Danny Meyer and Union Square Hospitality Group. On Thursday, Mets fans knew the score and lined up zealously for their "dragged through the garden" Chicago-style sausages, complete with little green "sports peppers."

Stand-up double

Yankee Stadium's top-hitting frankfurter is the hometown favorite, Nathan's, with snapping natural casings. (They're also served at Citi Field, but you'd hardly think about them there, given the competition.) An oldie and a pretty goodie.

Single



Burgers

Citi Field pins its hopes in this category on the charburger from Shake Shack, from St. Louis native Mr. Meyer. Quality patties grilled to a turn are worth the wait, even if some fans got so hungry while waiting in the line that they crammed their faces full of these fine sandwiches and looked like onetime White Sox second baseman Nellie Fox with a quid of Red Man bulging inside his cheek.

Double

▲ **Yankee Stadium's** Johnny Rockets outlet competes toe-to-toe with Shake Shack here. The meticulous charring is an example of what can be achieved by a large fast-food chain.

Double



Seafood

▲ At **Citi Field**, David Pasternack, of the great midtown fish restaurant Esca, stoops to conquer at Catch of the Sea, with lobster rolls and blackened shrimp po' boys. He is very generous on the lobster, in a correct split bun, but we could have used more mayo. This may have been a case of first-week jitters.

Single with RBI

Yankee Stadium has brought in Soy Kitchen to prepare sushi. If you buy it in a supermarket, why not in a sports arena? Just as raw, and just as dead.

Pop out to pitcher



Barbecue

▲ **Citi Field** features another Meyer-empire selection—barbecue, based on the chef's cityside emporium Blue Smoke. The ribs and pulled pork smoked here are no patch on what you'd get in Texas Hill country, but they'll satisfy even a sophisticated pork jones.

Single

At **Yankee Stadium**, Brother Jimmy's BBQ, part of a Manhattan mini-chain, depends on sauce to rehydrate its pulled pork. But going the distance is what counts, not how you get on the scoreboard.

Sacrifice fly advances runner to third



Sandwiches

At **Citi Field**, no serious contenders. **Walk**

▲ **Yankee Stadium** powders the ball with three league leaders. Boar's Head, the cold-cut giant, steps into the sports arena for the first time. We loved the overstuffed pastrami sandwich (but ask for mustard on the side, to prevent overdosing). Carl's Steaks turns out the same world-class Philly cheese steak it did in the old stadium. And **Lobel's**, the premium Manhattan butcher, operates a meat shop behind glass for the elite restaurants and sells prime steak sandwiches to the rest of us, who deserve great meat you can eat with one hand while pumping your fist with the other.

Three hits, two men score.



Specialties

▲ **Citi Field** got Floyd Cardoz, chef at the neo-Indian pacesetter Tabla in Manhattan, to reinvent his cooking for the Mexican cafe El Verano Taqueria. It's an amazingly authentic taste of real Mexico—soft corn tortillas filled with delicious pumpkin-seed-and-chicken mole, pork carnitas or skirt steak.

Grand-slam home run

Yankee Stadium limps in with La Esquina Latina (Latin Corner). Lackluster Cuban sandwiches and nacho bowls are a foregone failure if meant to appeal to customers with more precise ideas of Latinity.

Strikeout