

DINING

Big-League Eats

At many of baseball's newest stadiums, lobster rolls and handcarved steak sandwiches are replacing the lowly hot dog. **By JOYCE KEHL**



At Citi Field, a **Double ShackBurger** awaits, above; Daruma of Tokyo's twist on a ballpark standard, the **shrimp dog**, above right



BASEBALL FANS WERE PAYING an enormous amount of attention to the luxury seating, ticket prices, architectural styling and all manner of Las Vegas-like amenities at Yankee Stadium and Citi Field in New York as the 2009 baseball season got under way. But what about the food?

I'm not talking about the cuisine at the more-exclusive restaurants such as Citi Field's Acela Club and the Legends Suite Club at Yankee Stadium, where premium tickets that cost \$75 and \$500, respectively, are required to dine. As a fan who's eaten a lot of stadium chow since my first trip to Cleveland Municipal Stadium in the 1970s, I wanted to see some progress at the concessions available to those in the bleachers too.

In the newest Major League Baseball stadiums, gourmet eats have fattened revenues for owners and boosted ticket sales. I know San Franciscans who go to games just to devour the world's best garlic fries. At Citi Field, home of the Mets, consulting chefs Danny Meyer, Drew Nieporent and David Pasternack have produced a similar revolution in ballpark grub.

Meyer has perfected the model of serving fast food to the hungry masses at his two Shake Shacks in New York. At the new venue in Citi Field, he sensibly limits the offerings without impairing the quality. Yes, the line was long on a spring week-night when I was there along with 38,545 other fans, but it moved quickly as the burgers kept rolling off the griddle. My \$5.75 ShackBurger was hot, salty and crusty just like at his Madison Square Park original. There were fewer varieties of custard, but the pre-made black and white shake I grabbed at the bottom of the 9th inning wasn't runny despite the 80-degree-Fahrenheit (27-degree-Celsius) heat.

The Kansas City ribs (\$10) at Meyers's Blue Smoke stand were

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served hot but tasted bland despite the sweet sauce.

One of my favorites was the corn on a stick at El Verano Taqueria. The Mexican-style *cotija* corn is slathered in cheese and mayo and dusted with cayenne pepper. The ear was small for \$3.50, but the combination of sweet and spicy was perfectly balanced.

At the cleverly named Box Frites, the smoky bacon and blue cheese dipping sauce was thick and pungent and a good match for the Belgian-style fries.

I once went to an inter-league game at the Mets' former home, Shea Stadium, with a vegetarian who smuggled in beet salad in a Tupperware container. That, plus the fact that I was sporting a Cleveland Indians Chief Wahoo cap, made me sure we were going to be heckled, if not doused with beer.

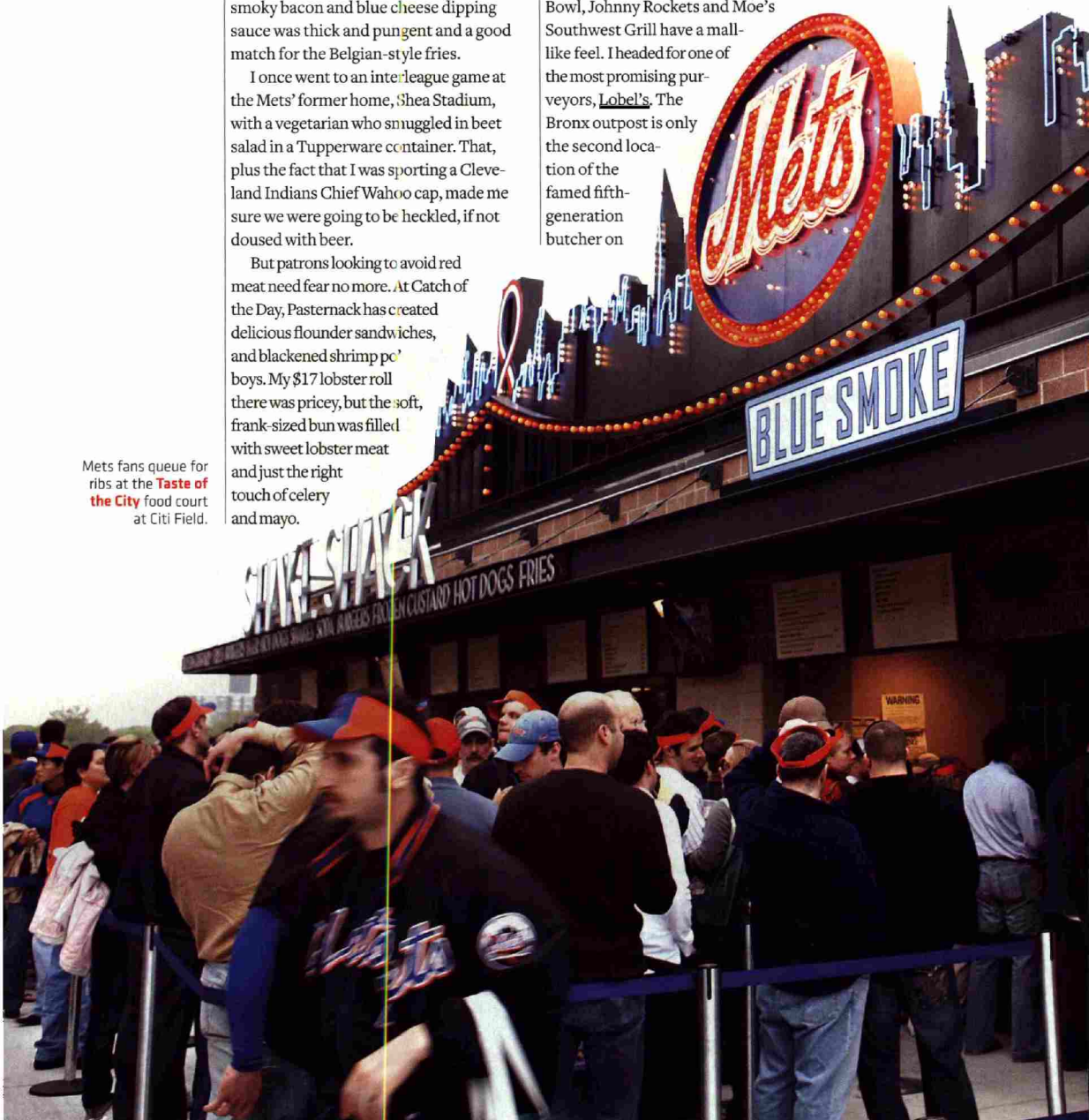
But patrons looking to avoid red meat need fear no more. At Catch of the Day, Pasternack has created delicious flounder sandwiches, and blackened shrimp po' boys. My \$17 lobster roll there was pricey, but the soft, frank-sized bun was filled with sweet lobster meat and just the right touch of celery and mayo.

The Daruma of Tokyo sushi stand is hard to find, located inside the World's Fare Market behind right field, but the \$8.75 shrimp dog was a nice discovery. The hot dog is made of ground shrimp and then covered with finely diced tomatoes, chopped red onion, spicy sauce and jalapenos if you like.

As I crossed town and changed leagues, I wasn't encouraged to see a gleaming sign for a Hard Rock Cafe visible from the outside of the new Yankee Stadium.

Inside, many of the food court options such as Asian Noodle Bowl, Johnny Rockets and Moe's Southwest Grill have a mall-like feel. I headed for one of the most promising purveyors, Lobel's. The Bronx outpost is only the second location of the famed fifth-generation butcher on

Mets fans queue for ribs at the **Taste of the City** food court at Citi Field.



Madison Avenue. An impressive glassed-in demonstration stall displays dry-aged meat and allows you to watch carvers in action preparing a rotating selection of beef. **Lobel's** signature steak sandwich is served at a field-level cart near the food court. I tried the sliced USDA prime, dry-aged New York Strip steak soaked in beef juices and served on a soft roll with a green-and-black-olive tapenade. It was tender and full of flavor. Unfortunately, the pre-wrapped steak sandwich I sampled from a generic upper-deck stand bore no relation to the Lobel's sandwich. It was dry and a bit tough despite an identical \$15 price tag.



At Mike's Deli, an earthy egg-plant parmigiana sandwich (\$10) was a better choice than the baked ziti (\$10.75), which won points for its nuggets of fresh mozzarella but tasted rewarmed and starchy. Opened just last year, Nationals Park in Washington goes beyond the conventional sausage on a bun to feature a D.C. institution since 1958: Ben's Chili Bowl, whose chili dogs and half-smokes (half beef and half pork) are to the nation's capital what Nathan's Famous is to Brooklyn's Coney Island. The sizzling dogs (\$7) are covered with a spicy homemade chili sauce of ground beef and pepper.

Hot, fresh giant pretzels from Noah's Pretzels are twisted into the shape of the curly W that adorns the Nationals' caps and covered with cinnamon sugar or more-traditional salt. The East Coast teams continue to play catch-up with the fare at two West Coast stadiums that are consistently noted for their unique and tasty menus. AT&T Park, where the San Francisco Giants have played since its opening in 2000, is a ballpark loaded with culinary guilty pleasures. Tucked behind the scoreboard far from the jammed concourses lies a mecca for Giants fans who take their gastronomy as seriously as games against the hated Dodgers. It's the Crazy Crab'z stand, where for \$15, you'll get a pile of Pacific Dungeness crabmeat mixed with celery, red onions and mayonnaise squeezed between two slices of grilled, garlic-buttered sourdough. The bread's smoky crunch and the creamy lumps of crab fuse power and finesse like an ace pitcher.

When Petco Park opened in 2004 in San Diego, local favorite Rubio's Fresh Mexican Grill secured a spot at the new stadium, where the fish tacos (\$4.50) remain a consistent winner with fans. The breaded fish is served in a soft corn tortilla with cabbage, salsa and a white sauce made with yogurt. A trip to a game is always a joy, but I grew up near Cleveland cheering for the Indians—the only team I could ever love. And that often meant that the hot dog—or, in actuality, the Bertman Ball Park Mustard on the frank—really was one of the best parts of the game. Fortunately, the latest advances in ballpark cuisine mean there's no longer a need to risk indigestion on a water-logged wiener or starve until after the final out.

Joyce Kehl is a copy editor at BLOOMBERG MARKETS. jkehl2@bloomberg.net With assistance from **Edward Robinson** in San Francisco and **Jonathan D. Salant** in Washington.



A **Noah's pretzel** at Washington's Nationals Park, above; a **Crazy Crab'z sandwich** at AT&T Park in San Francisco, above right

All-Star Eateries

Former players score in the restaurant world.

Zereoue (New York)

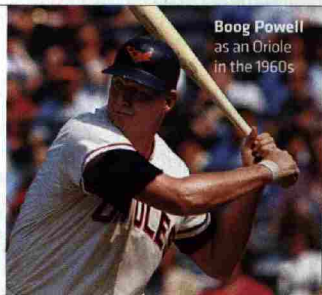
Erstwhile National Football League running back Amos Zereoue is owner and part-time chef at this Midtown bistro that fuses French and African cuisine in dishes such as *kedjjenau*, a chicken stew that's cooked in a clay pot. 212-679-9355

Wayne Gretzky's (Toronto)

The former National Hockey League star's eponymous restaurant near the Hockey Hall of Fame has an extensive menu, including pirogins inspired by his grandmother's recipe, jerk chicken and a "Great One" burger, named for the owner. 416-979-7825

Boog's Bar-B-Que (Baltimore)

All-Star Boog Powell serves up pit beef and barbecued ribs at his Camden Yards and Ocean City, Maryland, outposts. A Baltimore specialty, pit beef is thinly sliced and heaped on a bun with horseradish sauce and onions. 410-685-9800 J.K.



Boog Powell as an Oriole in the 1960s

ANDREW TESTA (TOP), MATTHEW FLEGENHEIMER/REDOX; FOCUS ON SPORT/GETTY IMAGES