

In the world of wieners, these dogs have bite

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ON A RECENT summer afternoon, I sat in a small new restaurant in northeast Baltimore County relishing hot dogs. Zack's is a sparkling 20-seat eatery that opened in April in the 8900 block of Old Harford Road, just north of Joppa Road. It promises "hog dogs with an attitude," and, judging by my visits, it lives up to its motto.

It treats the hot dog with culinary respect and the proper bun, yet remembers it is basically fun fare.

I had the \$3.25 Chicago-style classic dog. This is a Vienna Beef frank with a natural casing, steamed, topped with a sweet, bright-green relish, sliced tomatoes, fresh onions, a pickle wedge, celery salt and hot peppers on a poppy-seed bun. It was a quintessential Chicago experience, missing only the roar of the L, the whip of the wind and the fading of the Cubs.

At a nearby table, Angelina Vakoutis ate her steamed dog with sauerkraut, sweet relish onions and chili on an egg-washed potato roll. She said the flavors brought back memories of the distinctive dogs that her late father, Lambros George, used to sell at his hot-dog stand in Baltimore's Hollins Market.

Meanwhile, over in the corner, 4-year-old Anthony Bon was enjoying his grilled dog with ketchup and an unusual topping. "He likes his hot dog with olives," said Betty Bon, Anthony's grandmother. Olives are one of the many homemade toppings offered at Zack's. Bon added that her grandson is also taken with the restaurant's logo, a smiling skater dude holding a skateboard in one hand and a large hot dog in the other.

It is this kind of a crowd, one that delights in distinctive dogs, that the Apostolou family, the owners of Zack's, are trying to attract. The Apostolous are deep into hot dogs.

When Dimitrios "Jim" Apostolou was getting his degree at the University of Maryland School of Pharmacy, he used to eat lunch at the old Pollock Johnny's stand in the Lexington Market. He ordered his hot dog "all the way," with chili, mustard and special Pollock Johnny's saute.

When Jim's wife, Stephanie, who now runs a catering business called Heaven's Scent, was a student at Baltimore's International Culinary College, she would duck into the Pollock Johnny's on Baltimore Street for a quick hot dog with the works.

She preferred the flavor of the Pollock Johnny's dogs to the "Greek hot dogs," which her late mother, Estelle Pappasides, used to fix by splitting hot dogs, cooking them in a frying pan then seasoning them with lemon juice and oregano.

When their eldest son, Bill, graduated from [Towson University](#) this spring and faced a career choice of whether to go to law school or run a hot-dog restaurant, Bill chose the dogs over the torts.

They settled on the name, Zack's, because it felt right for a hot-dog place.

As I ate my Chicago dog, members of the Apostolou family told me how they had researched the field of frankfurters.

They had to decide what kind of dog they would be working with. After tasting hot dogs made by several sausage makers, they settled on those made by Vienna Beef, a Chicago

house of hot dogs that is more than 100 years old. The size of the hot dogs was "six-to-ones," which means six franks constitute 1 pound. They are all-beef.

Most of these hot dogs came with a natural casing for the skin that gives the eater a sensation of crispness when he bites. In the trade, a natural-casing hot dog is known as a "dog that bites back."

But this texture can surprise eaters not familiar with natural casings, who think the hot dog has not been properly cooked. So the Apostolous added some skinless Vienna Beefs to their menu for customers who want a kinder, gentler dog.

To get a first-hand feel for the regional differences in toppings, Jim visited the hotbeds of hot dogs: Chicago, New York and Atlanta.

He watched as the wieners of Atlanta were served Southern style, topped with coleslaw and chili.

In Chicago, a city that may or may not bury its mobsters in parking lots, he saw the hot dogs buried under a cascade of good-tasting toppings, the neon green relish, celery salt and peppers known as "hots."

In New York, the hot dogs were grilled and wrapped in a slice of beef bologna. Detroit dogs are also wrapped in bologna. All of these regional dogs are sold at Zack's.

The cloaked-in-bologna look is also popular in Baltimore, and 10 years ago, Seymour Attman told me how he thought it got started here. Until his death in 2002 at the age of 76, Attman presided over his family's delicatessen on East Lombard Street.

Attman's theory was that the bologna topping was first seen in Baltimore in the early 1940s at Nathan Ballow's delicatessen. Over the years the Ballow deli moved from North Avenue to Reisterstown Road, where it became Mandell and Ballow, and eventually went out of business, Attman recalled. But Ballow's practice of serving hot dogs with bologna stuck and spread through the city, he told me.

As for cooking styles, the Apostolous decided that at Zack's, all the hot dogs would be steamed for 20 minutes. Grilled dogs would be plucked from the steamer and cooked for a few minutes more on a flat grill. There would be two types of rolls: the poppy seed or a potato roll coated with an egg wash. There would be three kinds of mustard: basic French's, a Dijon and horseradish mustard.

In addition to preparing their classic dogs, the folks at Zack's are also open to suggestion and experimentation. For instance, following a customer's request, they recently added a corn dog, a staple of state fairs, in which the hot dog is wrapped in batter and fried in oil.

They rolled out a pulled pork dog, a hot dog topped with pulled pork. They are still searching, the owners said, for the ultimate Baltimore hot-dog topping.

"Maybe it will be something with Old Bay," Jim Apostolou told me.

I wasn't sure he was serious. I hope he was joking.