

The Great Ketchup Debate

"Nah, this stuff isn't getting to me, the shootings, the knifings, the beatings, old ladies being bashed in the head for their social security checks... Nah, that doesn't bother me. But you know what does bother me? You know what makes me really sick to my stomach? It's watching you stuff your face with those hotdogs. *Nobody, I mean nobody puts ketchup on a hot dog.*" – Clint Eastwood as "Dirty Harry" Callahan in the movie "Sudden Impact".

The above quote highlights long standing disputes among hot dog purists. Is it acceptable to have ketchup on a hot dog? This discussion can especially become heated in certain regions of the States (such as Chicago). Of course if you are operating a hot dog cart business you will most likely offer Ketchup as a condiment, and you are not going to become a food fascist and refuse to serve someone who asks for ketchup on their hot dog (even though there are hot dog stands and carts in Chicago where this is the case). But it is an interesting and fun debate to consider.

To begin with we will start with the anti Ketchup debates. We are going to begin with the National Hot Dog and Sausage Council, an official trade organisation based in Washington, DC. When coming up with a written code on proper hot dog etiquette in writing it issued this directive in their paper "Hot Dog Etiquette and everyday guidance for eating America's sacred food": "'Don't use ketchup on your hot dog after the age of 18."

But this view does extend further. To add more fuel to the fires of this hot debate let us stay in Washington, DC, let us consider the views of the President of the United States Barack Obama (it should be noted that he was formerly a Chicago resident and Illinois Senator). Back on June 3, 2011, when him and the mayor of Illinois stopped in for a chilli dog at one of the Rudy's Hot Dog stands the subject of ketchup came up. Obama made this declaration: "You shouldn't put ketchup on your hot dog". So even the commander and chief has a definite opinion on this matter.

We touched upon as it is partially a Chicago bias, but it does extend beyond that. Let us travel to Detroit. Charley Marcuse who has become somewhat of a local celeb, vends hot dogs at Comerica Park for Tigers games. He is world renowned for his operatic cry of "Ho-O-ot Do-O-ogs", a chant that delights many and infuriates some fans. But if you are drawn to the song of the hot dog vendor, don't make the mistake of asking for ketchup on your hot dog. He'll tell you in very direct terms "There is no ketchup in baseball!"

Well let us now consider the pro ketchup debate. The first two viewpoints we are going to consider are not really pro ketchup, they are anti food rules.

Jeff Ruby, dining critic at Chicago magazine made the following statement: "My stance is that it's perverse for any person to tell another, what he can and can't put on his food. That's foodie fascism."

Doug Sohn, chef/owner, of the world famous hot restaurant Hot Doug's said "I'm more morally opposed to food rules than I am opposed to ketchup on a hot dog. I don't think the flavour of ketchup matches well to other toppings, but if someone wants ketchup on their hot dog, and I know this sounds like heresy, I've got no problem with it."

It is good to note in 2005 according to the National Sausage and Hot Dog Council, ketchup was the second most popular condiment that people put on their hot dogs, with 23% choosing it as their condiment of choice (mustard was number one at 32%). Respondents from the Mid-West showed the greatest preference for ketchup.

Also going back to the ballpark, at Fenway Park in Boston, their signature hot dog is boiled and grilled Fenway-style, and then served on a New England-style bun, covered with ketchup and relish. I'm sure if you ask fan their views on whether or not ketchup belongs on a hot dog you would get strong arguments in favour of ketchup.

Also going back to Chicago, at the popular hot dog joint Gene & Jude's, they placed a ban on ketchup. But here is where the debate gets interesting. Sensing a demand in the market, the BP convenience store next door to Gene & Jude's prominently displays Heinz ketchup for \$2.39. At a McDonald's connected to the convenience store, there has been enough of a demand for ketchup that management has posted a sign: "Ketchup packet for Gene & Jude's customers, 20 cents." So even in Chicago there is a demand for ketchup on hot dogs.

It is not our intent to pick sides in this debate. Along with being a fun area of discussion, it also highlights an important acknowledgment that you need to be aware of as a hot dog cart operator. There are many different variations of hot dogs and condiments, and many regional differences. It is good to be aware of these when operating your cart. Understanding the food tastes of the community will help not only selecting products, but in promotion as well.

In conclusion, with the ketchup debate (or any other condiment) the question that matters isn't whether or not ketchup belongs on a hot dog, the question is, does your customers think it belongs on a hot dog. Nothing else matters.