Chicago's Hot Doug's Exotic Weiners to Close; Portillo's May Be Sold

DON BABWIN, Associated Press

In this May 7, 2014 photo, menus with the daily specials and regular fare adorn the walls at Hot Doug's, a gourmet hot dog diner in Chicago. Earlier this week, owner Doug Sohn announced he was closing the diner in October after nearly 14 years in business. The popular diner has been a must-stop destination for both locals and out-of-towners. **(AP Photo/M. Spencer Green)**

CHICAGO (AP) — In a city known for its love of both eating and bragging about its hot dogs, this was news nobody relished: Gourmet stand Hot Doug's, known for serving up options made of rattlesnake and yak, is closing. And the owner of another local hot dog institution, Portillo's, is thinking of selling.

Doug Sohn's announcement this week that he's closing his "sausage superstore" in October after more than 13 years — saying only that it was time to move on — triggered an outpouring of distress. And taking inspiration from Green Bay, where fans own the Packers football team, some Portillo's devotees have called on others to band together to buy the chain of 38 restaurants, most in the Chicago area.

"When I heard (Hot Doug's) was closing, it was heartbreaking," said Lakhi Siap, 25, a community organizer whose place in line there put him maybe an hour from ordering.

If it all seems a bit extreme, it makes sense in Chicago. The city's love affair with hot dogs dates back to 1893, when visitors to the World's Columbian Exposition gobbled up the odd-looking sandwiches by the thousands, and industry experts say sales remain steady. An estimated 200,000 are sold in the Chicago area a week, according to Timothy O'Brien, co-president of Chicago-based Vienna Beef.

"The hot dog is a symbol of Chicago," said Peter Alter, archivist at the Chicago History Museum, which features a giant plastic bun where kids can lie down like a frank and cover themselves in fake relish, mustard, pickles and the rest of what gives a hot dog its Chicago style.

The food is also a connection to the past of both the city and its residents.

"My grandfather took my dad to Portillo's and my dad took me there," said Eric Holtrop, a banker who supports what he and others acknowledge is the longest of long shot efforts to buy the half century-old business. "What if a bunch of Chicagoans pull together?"

The owner of Portillo's has suggested he's considering selling to capitalize on the brand's popularity.

Sohn's Hot Doug's, meanwhile, is important for another reason, said Bruce Kraig, a historian, hot dog expert and co-author of "Man Bites Dog: Hot Dog Culture in America."

"He was on the cutting edge of turning hot dogs into a kind of cuisine, a kind of fine dining," said Kraig.

Even if Sohn didn't invent the upscale hot dog, he was in the room when they started making them out of rattlesnake (Siap's favorite), kale and walnut pork sausage (one of Wednesday's specials), and foie gras (an ingredient that netted Sohn a $500 citation when he flouted a city ban, since overturned, a few years back).

Hot Doug's reputation drew Jeff and Angie Bridges, the owners of a San Antonio wine bar, to decide they had to stop there after seeing it win praise on television by the likes of chef and author Anthony Bourdain.

"We would have been devastated if we'd not come here before it closed," said Angie Bridges.

Kraig contends that the lines outside Hot Doug's and the front-page attention Sohn's announcement received say something else about the city — "We can say, 'We do this better than New York,'" he said.

Sohn prefers to talk about what he believes the reception to his announcement illustrates — Chicago's undying loyalty to its beloved fare.

"All the fancy stuff is nice, but in Chicago it's the hot dog," he said. "That's why I opened."

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