



An Iowa Icon

MaidRites in their 9th decade

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There are certain foods that are simply synonymous with Iowa—corn, pork tenderloins, and, of course, Maid-Rite. A favorite food of Iowans and exiles who've returned to visit, this quintessential comfort food is composed of steamed, seasoned ground beef served loose (not in a patty) on a bun, usually with a side of fries or onion rings. Locals usually top their overflowing sandwich with (dill) pickles and mustard for an extra savory taste experience. My 10-year-old daughter, who prefers hers with ketchup as well as mustard and without pickles, especially loves the soft bun.

Maid-rites are part of the family of dishes that include loose-meat sandwiches (as they are known in western Iowa), sloppy joes (national variation cooked with a tomato sauce, onions, and green peppers), and Sioux City's tavern (browned ground beef with sautéed onions and sometimes pickles and mustard). They are also related to Nebraska's Runza (a now trade-marked version of an ethnic German-Russian food consisting of ground beef cooked with cabbage and onions and baked in a bread pocket) and Wisconsin's (Cornish) pasty (ground beef or lamb cooked with root vegetables, sealed, and baked in a half-moon of dough). But the distinguishing feature of a Maid-Rite is the steamed and fragrantly-spiced ground beef overflowing its bun; a spoon is issued with each sandwich to ensure that not one mouthful will be wasted.

Maid-Rite along with White Castle (1921) and A&W (1925) are the three oldest American chain restaurants. But Maid-Rite was Iowa's first and featured a walk-up and then a drive-up window (the latter was rapidly copied by the other franchises). According to corporate histories (www.maid-rite.com, www.maidrite.com, and http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_gx5202/is_/_ai_n19122030), Muscatine butcher Fred Angell made the first sandwich for a customer in 1926. The customer pronounced the sandwich "made right" and a legend was born. Angell changed the spelling to "maid-rite" and franchised the treat. Restaurants in Newton and Marshalltown opened in 1927 and 1928, respectively.

While Maid-Rite has encountered various challenges over the years, including competing franchise owners and failed attempts to standardize business practices, overall, the brand has been amazingly successful, thanks to a loyal customer base. Now owned by Bradley Burt, a Des Moines-based investor group, and the city's Gillotti family, Maid-Rite's corporate headquarters in Iowa's capitol city has franchises in over 70 towns throughout Iowa, Nebraska, Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, and Ohio. While

the standard menu also includes another Iowa icon, Blue Bunny ice cream, as well as Seattle's Best coffee the loose-meat sandwich remains the key offering. But customers can now feast on a Cheese-Rite or a BBQ-Rite as well as other menu choices. Des Moines' Food Dude, Jim Duncan of CityView, wrote in 2008 that Maid-Rite "has become one of the 50 fastest-growing small businesses in America."

But Maid-Rite is not just a corporation. According to various posters on www.Roadfood.com and Sarah Lorenz's excellent history (International Directory of Corporate Histories, 1991 (62), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_gx5202/is_ /ai_n19122030), there are still many individually owned Maid-Rite restaurants throughout the Midwest. As original franchise holders, they were not required to comply with Burt's standardization efforts. The result has been a unique aberration in American restaurant chains.



Privately-owned restaurant maid-rites, as well as their home-made counterparts, vary according to local and family tastes with regard to spices, sauce, cooking method, and toppings. According to Sarah Lorenz (1991), Cliff Taylor's contract pre-dated the requirement that Maid-Rite franchise owners add the special seasoning that Angell developed, and the Marshalltown restaurant has never used it; Taylor's Maid-Rite is served with only onions, pickles, and mustard. Rationing during World War II led other restaurants to stop using the seasoning; their customers got used to the taste, and the owners never went back to the patented flavoring. Individuals and restaurants have also developed their own recipes. Some use more or less salt and pepper, others add in cream of mushroom soup or ketchup, some brown the meat and then steam it, some steam it with beer or beef broth, some add cola syrup, and still others violate purist standards by putting a slice of cheese on top. Devotees can find more information about and recipes for maid-rites at www.roadfood.com, www.electiclibrarian.net/blog and www.chowhound.com.

Unique even among Maid-Rite restaurants is Marshalltown's Taylor's Maid-Rite, which has been run continuously by members of the same family since 1928. Cliff Taylor, who started the original shop, sold his wife's home-baked pies, pickles from Marshall Vinegar Works and buns from Strand's Bakery, according to Taylor's website. Cliff's son, Don, who took over along with his mother, Polly, built a new restaurant in 1958, just across the street from his father's original shop. Polly Taylor continued to oversee the operation until 1985, when her grandson Don Short took the reins. In more recent years, the younger Don's mother (Don and Polly Taylor's daughter), Sandra Taylor Short, and father, Con Short, came out of retirement to run this 80-year-old family business.

Sandy Taylor Short explains that there is no secret to their Maid-Rite. They just "buy good beef, grind it fresh every day, and add salt as them make them." If customers ask for "everything," they get mustard, onions fresh-ground on the premises every day, and pickles. For the most part, Taylor's is run the way it's always been. Unlike corporate Maid-Rites, explains Sandy, they serve only "one sandwich, really good malts, ice cream, pie, coffee, chips, that's it. We didn't have ketchup until two years ago." This last innovation was in response to a customer vote (around 2,000 took part), which went in favor of mustard only but only just. With such close results, Taylor's decided to offer ketchup. And about six months ago, the restaurant starting offering a cheese-topped option; it hasn't gone over very well, says Sandy, because "there's so much meat on the sandwich, you can't taste the cheese."

Besides the famous sandwich, Taylor's is also known for its home-made pies. Five years ago, Taylor's was lucky enough to get local baker, Laurie Wadle of Marshalltown's Morning Glory Bakery, to make them. Wadle even uses the Taylor family's recipe for the banana cream and chocolate cream confections and also makes strawberry, rhubarb, pecan, blueberry, apple, peach, cherry, French silk, and the newest, Key lime, as well as homemade muffins and kolaches.

If you're just about anywhere in the Midwest, Maid-Rite restaurants are ubiquitous in shopping and strip malls as well as highway rest stops. But it's also worth stopping in at some of the non-corporate shops for a taste of local fare. And if you're in Marshalltown, Iowa, check out Taylor's Maid-Rite. And if you aren't lucky enough to live nearby or be passing through, you can get one (or more) sent via mail order.

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