

D.C., a breakfast town?

BREAKFAST FROM EI

in a way. We're always running, running, running."

Look around the Washington area, and you see that breakfast is mostly a functional, calorie-and-caffeine intake period. It's a stop at the chain coffee shop for a latte and (maybe) a pre-made sandwich. It's a turn into the McDonald's drive-through for juice and a McMuffin, a meal that can be unwrapped and consumed right in the car. Increasingly, what breakfast is not is a morning ritual of coffee, bacon, eggs, reflection and the daily paper (as if anyone buys those anymore, which is another story).

So what has happened to the so-called "most important meal of the day"?

Perhaps, as Marion Nestle suggests, we're finally listening to our bodies and not American marketing gurus. The nutritionist, author and New York University professor thinks the breakfast-is-important message was drummed up by cereal companies hoping to manufacture a need for their products. The truth is, breakfast is more important to children than adults simply because the former do not have the same capacity to store glycogen, which Nestle describes as "what keeps you going when you're not eating."

Nestle knows from experience that breakfast is eminently skip-able. She rarely eats it — and makes no apologies. "I truly believe that people should eat when you're hungry, and if you're not hungry in the morning, the world is not going to end," she says.

A general lack of interest in food in the morning may explain why relatively few restaurants cater to those early weekday risers. (For the better breakfast spots in and around Washington, see our list online at washingtonpost.com/food and a gallery at wapo.st/bestbreakfast.) But there are other factors as well. Coffee chains like Starbucks have aggressively targeted the breakfast crowd by doubling down on their morning options, offering

not only hot drinks but also hot sandwiches, parfaits, pastries and other to-go items. But restaurateurs also say that breakfast service places an added burden on already-busy kitchens and rarely returns the profit that rewards such efforts. Just as important, they add, morning shifts are notoriously hard to staff.

"Most chefs and restaurateurs are creatures of the night," says Jeff Tunks, chef and co-founder of Passion Food Hospitality, which owns DC Coast, Acadiana, PassionFish and other area eateries. "I don't think a lot of chefs get up early and get breakfast."

Calories to burn

The ever-shrinking breakfast hour is, by no means, exclusive to the Washington area, but some of the region's characteristics may exacerbate the decline, which even includes the classic D.C. power breakfast, which hotel executives say has dropped off as well. The area's workforce suffers some of the worst traffic in the nation, leaving little time for un-hurried meals in the a.m. That same workforce also includes hundreds of thousands of federal, white-collar employees who don't require the vast consumption of morning calories that used to fuel the heavy-labor jobs of previous generations. In fact, Joe Spinelli, president and founder of the Maryland-based Restaurant Consultants, suggests that you can find more breakfast spots in cities with more blue-collar workers, like Baltimore.

"I can't state this for sure, but there are probably twice as many breakfast places there as in D.C.," says Spinelli.

He has had a unique perspective on the evolving breakfast scene. Spinelli was a consultant for Starbucks when the chain decided to launch a hot breakfast service in the mid-2000s under the somewhat ominous name, the Warming Program. Washington was deemed an ideal Warming zone, and Starbucks hired Spinelli to secure permits and help retrofit dozens and dozens of locations with coolers and Tur-

boChefventless ovens.

"They found that they had a captive market," Spinelli says. "They had all these people in the stores early in the morning." The stores that offer the pre-fab, reheated breakfast sandwiches add hundreds of dollars a day in sales, the consultant notes.

The concept of an on-the-run breakfast, however, dates back far earlier than Starbucks's morning power grab. You could say it began in the 1970s when a California McDonald's franchisee named Herb Peterson created the Egg McMuffin, which he based on his favorite breakfast dish, eggs Benedict. According to Anne A. Kohlenberger, breakfast category manager for McDonald's USA, the Egg McMuffin debuted on Jan. 31, 1972, at Peterson's McDonald's outlet in Santa Barbara. A year later, Kohlenberger notes, "the iconic sandwich became a staple on the McDonald's breakfast menu. The sandwich was groundbreaking in changing the eating habits of millions of Americans, as prior to the Egg McMuffin, no other quick-service restaurant served breakfast."

Four decades later, the McDonald's and Starbucks approach to breakfast is starting to dominate the way hotel and restaurant operators think about the morning meal, at least on weekdays when time is precious. Kimpton Hotels, for example, is planning to test a grab-and-go breakfast service at one of its New York properties, says Greg Francis, senior director of restaurant operations for the East Coast.

Breakfast by location

Despite the rise of grab-and-go morning meals, a few local restaurateurs are starting to venture into the breakfast market, hoping to capture either those eaters who still want a sit-down meal or those who want something fresher than a reheated sandwich. Michael Babin, co-owner of the Neighborhood Restaurant Group, has designs to open an eatery near Dupont Circle, an area that has shown a taste for breakfast. Likewise, when NRG opens its Red Apron Butchery shop in Penn Quarter this fall, chef-butcher Nathan Anda plans to roll out a breakfast menu that

will offer both sit-down and take-away options.

Like Babin, Passion Food's Tunks has shied away from breakfast service — until he opened Burger Tap & Shake on Washington Circle, where the confluence of business offices, George Washington University classrooms and residential units provided plenty of reasons to open for the first meal of the day.

BTS's breakfast burgers menu was launched in February, and its sales so far are fairly modest, ranging between 40 to 60 customers on most weekdays before swelling to 70 or more on Fridays. You could argue that those numbers underscore what Nestle suggested in the first place: Many may not feel hungry enough to fuel up first thing in the morning.

The science of human biology might drive some people's breakfast decisions, but not those of Ann Cashion, the James Beard award-winning chef behind Johnny's Half Shell, which caters to Capitol Hill power brokers most weekday mornings. When not working, Cashion loves meeting close friends for breakfast. She fondly recalls the breakfasts she's enjoyed in New Orleans and San Francisco, cities not built on politics, power and cynicism.

Breakfast "just doesn't seem to be part of the culture here," Cashion says. "Maybe breakfast is driven by feeling connected."

Is Cashion suggesting that breakfast is too intimate for Washington, a town increasingly comfortable with fractionousness and extremes? She laughs and brings the question back to the personal level, where she draws a subtle comparison between the meal that Washington loves (dinner) and the one it apparently doesn't (breakfast).

"I saw my friend over breakfast because it did seem more intimate in the sense of really catching up and really being present," she says. "Maybe it's kind of like the difference between morning light and candlelight." True friends, in other words, don't need a flickering ambience to feel close. They can be intimate even over breakfast, a feast that appears to be turning into the most neglected meal of the day.

carmant.washpost.com

BEER MADNESS 2012

Our new king of craft brews comes from Hawaii, in a can

BY GREG KITSOCK

More than 4,800 miles separate the two finalists of the 32, all-American craft brews of Beer Madness 2012: **Coconut Porter** from Maui Brewing in Lahaina, Hawaii, and Exit 4 from Flying Fish Brewing in Cherry Hill, N.J.

But only one vote decided the winner. Coconut Porter in previous rounds thumped the opposition with scores of 8-1, 8-1, 6-3. Yet it barely squeaked by last year's champion, 5-4. It thus became the first canned beer to wear the Beer Madness crown.

It would be hard to match up two more dissimilar beers: the roasty porter and the fruity, well-hopped American take on a Belgian triple. Several of our panelists experienced severely divided loyalties.

"The exotic, floral and fruity notes are totally in balance with the overall structure of body, hops and alcohol," commented sommelier Kathryn Bangs of the Exit 4. High praise, you would think, but she nevertheless circled the porter, noting, "I just like this one more."

"I like both of these beers, but my heart lies with the malts," decided reader/judge Halley Fehner in choosing the same.

Curiously, none of our tasters described the porter as tasting like coconut. That subtlety, says brewery co-founder Garrett Marrero, is intentional. "We get beat up a lot for that. You can hardly taste the coconut. But it's not meant to be a pina colada."

Marrero uses strips of locally grown coconut, about 200 pounds per 25-barrel batch of beer. He toasts the coconut to eliminate the oils (which would kill any head), then adds it to a vessel called the hopback as the beer flows from kettle to fermenter. The beer also steeps on sacks of shredded coconut following the primary fermentation.

A few of our panelists (four pros and winners of the public competition for four spots) described the brew as tasting like coffee or chocolate, yet Coconut Porter contains neither of these ingredients. The mocha flavors, Marrero says, derive from six types of malted barley, including highly kilned varieties such as chocolate and black malt. The coconut's purpose is to add another dimension, "a toasted nutty sweetness."

At 6 percent alcohol by volume, Coconut Porter is robust, a little stronger and fuller-bodied than the brown porter style. It's very food-friendly, says Marrero, who has incorporated it into recipes including braised short ribs and chocolate cake. It also makes a terrific beer float with Rocky Road ice cream, he adds.

Coconut Porter inspired two of our restaurant-pro judges to create recipes as well. Mixologist Gina Chersevani played off the beer's notes by adding rum, coconut milk and sugarcane syrup. The tall cocktail looks like a black-and-white milkshake. Palena pastry chef Agnes Chin used the beer to steep steel-cut oats and to provide the background for a dense, rich chocolate coconut porter cake, which she's serving this week at the restaurant with a cacao nib ice cream and drizzle of espresso caramel.

"I always loved great beer," says Marrero, who grew up in San Diego, a city often described as beer valhalla. "I graduated from high school the same year that Stone Brewing Co. opened." Marrero later became close friends with Stone's co-founder, Greg



TRACY A. WOODWARD/THE WASHINGTON POST

Mixologist Gina Chersevani's Black, White & Tiki features the Beer Madness winner Coconut Porter, below. The recipe is at washingtonpost.com/recipes.



DEB LINDSEY FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Koch. When Coconut Porter trounced Stone's Sublimely Self-Righteous Ale in Round 3, Koch e-mailed Marrero, "You sunk our battleship!"

After a brief career as an investment consultant, Marrero and his wife Melanie opened a brewpub on Maui in 2005. They began canning beer in 2007. "We believe cans protect the beer better from light and oxygen," he asserts. Their lightness and compactness allow him to ship beer as far afield as Maryland, Virginia, the District and even Puerto Rico.

Marrero likes to experiment with other Hawaiian ingredients. Mana Wheat is an unfiltered American wheat beer flavored with pineapple. His draft-only Onion Mild actually contains caramelized and charred onions, a sweet variety grown on Maui and celebrated in a local festival. Attendees at this year's Savor Beer and food festival can get an early sip of his Sobrehumano Palena 'ole ("superhuman without limits"), a collaboration with Michigan's Jolly Pumpkin Ales, brewed with Michigan cherries and Hawaiian passion fruit (called liliko'i).

Marrero will spend about a week in Washington around Savor in early June, no doubt with a little more swagger in his step than the average tourist after outlasting the rest of the best.

food.washpost.com

Maui Coconut Porter is sold at several Whole Foods Markets locations, Rodman's in the District, Potomac Gourmet in Oxon Hill, Planet Wine in Alexandria and at Total Wine stores.

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