

SCORE Client C'est Cheese in the News...

The 33 Tastiest Diners, Lunch Counters, Food Trucks, and Chili Parlors in Town

[November 2016](#), [CincinnatiMagazine.com](#)

→ **EVERY CINCINNATIAN SHOULD VISIT THESE 7 CLASSIC CHILI PARLORS**
Cincinnati chili is best served with crackers, hot sauce, Formica, and fluorescent lighting.



PHOTOGRAPH BY AARON CONWAY / STYLING BY MARY SEGUIN

Chili Time

This diner in St. Bernard opened in 1963 and its decor has retained that spare mid-century vibe. You half expect the cast of *Alice* to appear from behind the counter. The chili here is meaty and flavorful, and on the salty side, so it's best ordered over spaghetti with cheese (oh, the palate balancing genius of this holy trinity). Chili Time uses a slightly thicker-gauge noodle than you'll find at Skyline, but there's plenty of chili and cheese loaded on top to maintain balance. Gluten free? Try their bunless coney: three wieners with chili, cheese, mustard, and onion. Streetpops HQ, located across the street, is open noon to 4, weekends. Quell the rising tide of heartburn with a newfangled dessert in one of Streetpops's artisanal flavor combos, like goat cheese and caramelized pineapple or lemon-lavender. 4727 Vine Street., St. Bernard, (513) 641-1130

Blue Ash Chili

While BAC also has locations in Mason and Springdale, the flagship is packed with personality. Classic record albums and kitschy signage line the walls and the booths are kitted out with mini jukeboxes. They offer breakfast, double-decker sandwiches, burgers, and other diner fare, plus they have a liquor license. Guy Fieri visited in 2010 as part of his Food Network show, *Diners, Drive-ins, & Dives*, and BAC pays homage on their menu with Guy's Way, a bowl of plain chili with onions and crackers. If that sounds a bit too *ordinaire*, try a slaw dog: a chili dog topped with creamy homemade coleslaw, or their exclusive six-way: spaghetti, chili, cheese, onions, beans, and fried jalapeño caps. BAC will serve you an eight-pound version of this dish as part of its No Freakin' Way! Challenge; clean your plate in 60 minutes or less and it's free. If you live. 9565 Kenwood Rd., Blue Ash, (513) 984-6107; 4200 Aero Dr., Mason, (513) 492-9650; 11711 Princeton Pike, Springdale, (513) 873-4663; blueashchili.com

Cretan's Grill

This time machine (with laudable chili) will transport you back to 1948. A sign over a row of wooden booths

reads: “Please do not sit one in a booth between 11:30 and 1,” a reminder of the days when the place accommodated throngs of shift workers on their lunch break. No such worry now; Cretan’s, and its regular customers, are in their dotage, but conversation over four-ways (there is no fifth way here) keeps contemporary; driving etiquette around the new streetcar was the topic of the day when we visited in August. The parlor remains spick-and-span, the chili is subtly spiced, the crackers snap, and our waitress even offered to top off our pops. If you go, plan ahead: Cretan’s is only open from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., Monday through Friday. And bring cash because they don’t take credit cards. You’re stepping back in time, remember? *7039 Vine St., Carthage, (513) 821-1203*

Empress Chili

If Camp Washington Chili is the Queen City’s big daddy, then Empress is her grande dame. Empress first opened on Vine between Eight and Ninth streets in 1922, making Greek brothers Tom and John Kiradjieff the first to strike Cincinnati chili gold. They named their parlor after the Empress burlesque theater next door. Despite its history (and a terrific logo), Empress has gotten lost in the marketing sauce over the years and is now down to just two parlors, one in Alexandria and one on Werk Road in Bridgetown, a small storefront tucked away in a strip mall next to The Pirates Den. All the usual suspects are represented on the menu. It’s our belief that everything is better with Fritos, so try their Walking Taco: chili over Fritos, topped with lettuce, tomato, onion, and sour cream. Don’t forget a side of their excellent Saratoga chips to keep things crunchy. *7934 Alexandria Pike, Alexandria, (859) 635-5900, empresschilialexandria.com; 3670 Werk Rd., Delhi Twp., (513) 922-3311*

Dixie Chili

This red, white, and blue beacon on Monmouth Street in Newport (there are also outposts in Erlanger and Covington) hews pretty closely to the retro style of many a chili parlor, but with a few unique riffs both on and off the menu. Place your order at the register, grab a cafeteria-style tray, and slide it down the counter to receive your order. Then grab a table near their classic jukebox, or outside—Dixie is the only spot we visited that offers chili *al fresco*. Tuck into a classic coney or try the Chili Man Dip for two: Philly cream cheese, mashed pinto beans, chili, chopped onions, topped with shredded cheese and parsley, and served with tortilla chips. Dixie also offers a vegetarian chili (if you like that sort of thing) with a tangy blend of onions, tomatoes, textured soy protein, and dried apples. Can’t decide? Dixie sells a three-ounce “taste of chili” for \$1.99. *733 Monmouth St, Newport, (859) 291-5337; 3716 Dixie Hwy., Erlanger, (859) 727-2828; 2421 Madison Ave., Covington, (859) 431-7444; dixiechili.com*

Price Hill Chili

Since opening on Glenway Avenue in 1962, Price Hill Chili has become more than a restaurant. It’s a west side community center, power breakfast spot, post-church lunch hub, and game day destination. “Elder Corner” and “Heart of the Hill” are duly earned monikers. Think of it as the village green, with chili. In a city full of deep-rooted chili joints, PHC has added to its family tree by scooping up the hearts and minds of west-siders who come for the solid diner food and convivial atmosphere. In addition to PHC’s dining room and patio area (not quite outdoor dining, but with plenty of sliding glass doors) you can sidle up to their full service bar, the Golden Fleece, and order anything from Price Hill Chili’s extensive menu, which naturally includes all the usual ways and means of their popular take on Queen City chili. *4920 Glenway Ave., Price Hill, (513) 471-9507, pricehillchili.com*

Pleasant Ridge Chili

Classic sign, check. Jukebox, check. Red vinyl booths, check. Generous portions, check. Line-up of non-chili diner classics, check. Pleasant Ridge Chili embodies the best of the chili parlor vibe without drifting into kitsch. Some social media commentators give the brown gravy cheese fries here high marks, but if your preferred gravy is chili, you can get a ladle full of PRC’s family recipe on those fries instead. Most chili dishes are available as half-portions, in case you’re, um, eating light. PRC has been a neighborhood staple since 1964 and their lunch crowd is as diverse as the environs. Being open from 9 a.m. until 4:30 a.m. also wins PRC a lot of

love. The only way you'll leave Pleasant Ridge Chili hungry is if you try to pay with a credit card; they only accept cash. 6032 Montgomery Rd., Pleasant Ridge, (513) 531-2365, pleasantryditchili.com

→ HAVE IT YOUR WAY

In no particular order: A few joints where the burgers sizzle, the beer is cold, and there's always a spot at the bar.

Chicken on the Run

Bobby Burger: Dive bar in the front, family friendly neighborhood joint in the back. That's not weird, is it? Stuff yourself with the triple-decker Bobby Burger at a rock-bottom price. Upgrade to the Fire Fries—cheese fries doused with hot sauce—and don't forget to take your Prilosec.

You're Drinking: They have a few taps with local selections, but whatever you get, make sure it's cold (see Fire Fries, above). 7255 Ohio Ave., Deer Park, (513) 791-6577, facebook.com/chickenontherundp



The Bobby Burger at Chicken on the Run
PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNA KNOTT

Herb 'N Thelma

Cheeseburger: The cheese is strictly American, your only vegetables are pickles and onions, and the bun is basic. But the whole is more than the sum of its parts: juicy, fresh, perfectly seasoned. We like ours with a bag of the salt-and-vinegar Dirty Kettle chips.

You're Drinking: Something from one of six rotating drafts (we like Country Boy Brewing's Shotgun Wedding), or a PBR can. 718 W. Pike St., Covington, (859) 491-6984

Gas Light Café

Gas Light Burger: It's dark, and cozy, and always welcoming. The half-pound Gas Light Burger is the star, but it's supported by solid onion rings, standup waffle fries, or (our favorite) crisp crinkle fries. The choice is up to you.

You're Drinking: MadTree—PsychOPathy is cheaper here than at the brewery—or another local draft from more than a dozen taps. 6104 Montgomery Rd., Pleasant Ridge, (513) 631-6977

Midway Café

Midway Classic Burger: New owners rebooted this Ft. Thomas mainstay late last year. The signature burger comes with American cheese, bacon, egg, and housemade ketchup. Both meats come fresh from Ebert's Meats in Newport, so you're supporting two locally owned businesses at once.

You're Drinking: One of 14 rotating taps (mostly craft), or a shot of bourbon from their not-small selection. *1017 S. Ft. Thomas Ave., Ft. Thomas, (859) 781-7666, facebook.com/midwaycafeftthomas*

Anderson Township Pub

Georgetown Village Burger: On Thursdays, if you buy a burger, you get a second for \$5. We couldn't resist the Georgetown Village, which is stuffed with blue cheese, blackened, then covered with Roquefort dressing. We chose the fresh-cut fries on the side instead of a salad.

You're Drinking: If you want draft, Stella Artois is it, but they've got a broader selection in bottles. Or have a cocktail. *6694 Clough Pike, Anderson Twp., (513) 231-0601*

→ INTERNATIONAL COMFORT FOOD ROUNDUP: CARIBBEAN CUISINE

Set your sights further afield than just the city center and you'll find plenty of quality empanadas, tostones, and mojo chicken with Caribbean pedigrees.

C&M BBQ Grill

Set your sights further afield than just the city center and you'll find plenty of quality empanadas, tostones, and mojo chicken with Caribbean pedigrees. Lesson number one: Order a Ting! While it's non-alcoholic, it is effervescent and grapefruit flavored, and the high acidity makes it ideal to quaff with richer spicy foods. Case in point: the curry braised goat at C&M BBQ Grill in Kennedy Heights. You'll have to eat slow to avoid ingesting some of the smaller bones, but in the process you can savor the rich nuances of Mary Solomon's secret spice blend. A Jamaica native, Solomon also smokes up some mean spare ribs alongside dirt-cheap sides of beans and rice, greens, and a classic picnic potato salad. *6457 Kennedy Ave., Kennedy Heights, (513) 631-8888, cmbbqgrill.net*

Island Frydays

For tostones, we swear by Island Frydays. From the ubiquitous thump of Bob Marley—it's scientifically impossible to be cranky while listening to reggae music—to some of the nicest counter help on the planet, Frydays should be your go-to lunch spot near UC for savory jerk chicken (heavy on the all-spice and scotch bonnet chilies) and beef patties (a savory pastry filled with curried beef). *2826 Vine St., Corryville, (513) 498-0680, islandfrydays.com*

Caribe

The alternative Caribbean hot pocket can be sampled just down Short Vine at Caribe. Choose the über-cheap combo with a chorizo empanada, rice, and two stews (we liked the jerk chicken and the lentils) for a whopping \$8.50. Leftovers reheat well (to keep the empanada flaky, use the oven, not the microwave), if you have that kind of self-control. *2605 Vine St., Corryville, (513) 221-1786, caribeonvine.com*



Chicken and chorizo empanadas from Caribe
PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNA KNOTT

→ IN A BLT RUT? TRY ONE OF THESE CLASSIC DINER DISHES

Anchor Grill

Goetta, Lettuce, And Tomato Double-Decker: You gotta love a classic with a twist. While the BLT always inspires nostalgia (it's my dad's signature dish), subbing goetta for bacon takes this sandwich to "meal of the day" level. Literally. It's hard for me to summon much of an appetite after consuming one of these. *438 Pike St., Covington, (859) 431-9498*



Anchor Grill's Double Decker
PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNA KNOTT

Sis's On Monmouth

The Ketchup-Smothered Meatloaf Dinner: Nothing says "stick to your ribs" quite like meatloaf and mashed potatoes. Fortunately, Sis's doesn't mess around with a timid little smear of tomato product atop the

meat. They full-on smother that loaf with plenty of Heinz. *837 Monmouth St., Newport, (859) 431-3157, sisonmonmouth.com*

Sebastian's

Dolmathakia Dinner: Unless you've actually sat down and hand-rolled a pan of stuffed grape leaves, you're probably not aware that this dish is a genuine labor of love. Sue Sebastian, wife of the omnipresent Alex, makes these exquisitely briny dolmathakia herself. They'll ruin you for the flabby-flavored prefab ones forever. *5209 Glenway Ave., Westwood, (513) 471-2100, sebastiansgyros.com*

Stephens' Old Village Restaurant

Open Face Turkey Dinner: Slice after slice of lean turkey breast is piled onto white sandwich bread before being smothered in savory turkey gravy. Expect tryptophan levels to spike almost immediately. Drive home with every window down in an effort to stay awake. *3323 Harrison Ave., Cheviot, (513) 661-6840, stephensoldvillage.com*

Marx Hot Bagels

Vegetarian Matzo Ball Soup: Marx is keeping it kosher, which is why you won't find any poultry amongst the matzo here. Large pieces of tender, bias-cut carrot, celery, and onion mingle with a baby fist-sized matzo ball that's just dense enough to sink to the bottom. While the soup itself is filling, we also appreciate the crunchability of their complementary bagel chips. *9701 Kenwood Rd., Blue Ash, (513) 891-5542, marxhotbagels.com*

→ THESE ARE THE ELEMENTS OF A PERFECT DINER

The Anchor Grill

Counter: We love the seaside mural and the jukebox, but the counter at The Anchor (above) has its own ambiance—augmented by the wall of ceramic pirate heads and a motley collection of electric lighthouses that serve as a beacon in the wee hours for this 24/7 institution. *438 Pike St., Covington, (859) 431-9498*



The Anchor Grill
PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNA KNOTT

The Echo's Hot Mess

Hangover Helper: The name may be a bit off-putting to my OCD brethren, but the greasy goodness (eggs, home fries, cheese, bacon, sausage, and gravy) settles a tumultuous tummy after one too many the night before. *3510 Edwards Rd., Hyde Park, (513) 321-2816, echo-hydepark.com*

Hathaway's Free Pie Tuesdays

Pie: They've been slinging breakfast and lunch at the base of the Carew Tower since 1956, but this turquoise-and-black time capsule is especially worth a visit on Tuesdays, when they send you home with your choice of complementary pie. Naturally, you'll choose the apple. 441 Vine St., downtown, (513) 621-1332, [facebook.com/hathawaysdiner](https://www.facebook.com/hathawaysdiner)

Santorini Family Restaurant

Coffee: Fine dining folk may worship Danny Meyer as their hospitality guru, but I'll gladly bow down to west side warmth and the unparalleled (read: never scorched) bottomless cup of coffee at Santorini in Cheviot. 3414 Harrison Ave., Cheviot, (513) 662-8080

Stephens' Old Village Restaurant

Atmosphere: It's like eating breakfast in Nana's hyper-clean, lovingly dated living room. Five minutes in this joint and you'll never meet your peeps at Perkins again. 3323 Harrison Ave., Cheviot, (513) 661-6840, [stephensoldvillage.com](https://www.stephensoldvillage.com)

Bluebird Restaurant

Tableside Jukeboxes: Savor a slice of sinfully moist, Day-Glo lemon bundt cake as you queue up Patsy Cline, Frank Sinatra, and the "Walrus of Love" himself, Barry White, on the tableside jukebox. Nothing beats Barry and a bundt. 4629 Montgomery Rd., Norwood, (513) 351-2427

Main Street Café

Cup-O-Chili: Plenty of kick with a low quotient of kidney beans, this classic beef chili keeps the heartburn to a minimum. Main Street gets bonus points for the high-rent Westminster oyster crackers. Serving any other brand is categorically uncivilized. 6903 Main St., Newtown, (513) 272-2030, [ms-cafe.com](https://www.ms-cafe.com)

Mama's Grill

Double Decker Sandwiches: Deep in the wilds of Williamsburg, west of town by a while, are some of the largest—not to mention cheapest (most top out at \$5.99)—double-decker sandwiches around. We've yet to eat a whole one. Road trip, anyone? 4227 All Star Dr., Williamsburg, (513) 724-5700

→ OUR FAVORITE FOOD TRUCKS (RIGHT THIS SECOND, ANYWAY...)

Food trucks are the perfect combination of takeout and delivery. Sit on Fountain Square long enough, and most of these mobile kitchens will come to you. Or use their schedules as an excuse to explore your city. Either way, your lunch is ready.

Sunny Side Brunch

This diner-on-wheels gives the classic counter breakfast a brunchy upgrade. Standards like egg sandwiches, omelettes, and a "sunny hash" are made with locally sourced ingredients (the hand-written menu board name-checks Sixteen Bricks Bakery, Shadeau Breads, Eckerlin's Meats, and Georgetown's Emmett Ridge Farm) and the execution is humble and tasty. If you're not up for a full breakfast, try the Sugar Bombs. Flavor-wise, they land somewhere between a doughnut, a hush puppy, and a funnel cake—otherwise known as the perfect breakfast dessert. *Catch Them At:* Oakley Crossroads, (513) 240-2502, [streetfoodfinder.com/Sunnysidebrunch](https://www.streetfoodfinder.com/Sunnysidebrunch), [facebook.com/Sunnysidebrunch](https://www.facebook.com/Sunnysidebrunch)

Tacos Locos

This truck has come a long way since it parked in a mechanic's lot on Oakley's somewhat desolate Robertson Avenue a few years back. Now it's stationed in the parking lot of a Pleasant Ridge gas station, the formerly hand-written menu is neatly typed, and you can upgrade your \$2 al pastor taco order to include new items like

camarón (shrimp) salad, mushroom quesadillas, or a larger-than-life Milanese torta. *Catch Them At: 6135 Montgomery Rd., Pleasant Ridge, (513) 306-3617*

Cuban Pete

Cuban Pete is living the food truck dream: Business was so good that they opened a brick-and-mortar at 133 East Court Street. If you aren't based downtown during any part of your day, then visit the mobile truck for a shortened version of the menu, which almost always includes the classic Cuban (ham, pork, Swiss cheese, mustard, mayonnaise, and pickle on Cuban bread) and the Chicky Boom, a less fatty chicken-themed Cuban sandwich with a splash of Sriracha sauce. *Catch Them At: O'Bryans Wine & Spirits, cubanpetesandwiches.com, facebook.com/cubanpetesandwich, Twitter: [@qbn_pete](https://twitter.com/qbn_pete)*

Empanadas Aqui

There isn't much in the way of Venezuelan food in Cincinnati, so it's lucky for us that this modest truck handles the genre nicely. There are two menu options: Arepas (grilled stuffed flatbreads) or empanadas (fried turnovers). One kinda feels healthy, one kinda doesn't. Get anything that features locally made Venezuelan cheese—we like the Domino arepa's queso-blanco-and-black bean combo. And the Carne Mechada empanada is everything you always wanted and never, ever got from a Hot Pocket. *Catch Them At: 6279 Tri Ridge Blvd., Loveland (Ward's Corner), empanadasaqui.com, facebook.com/empanadasaqui, Twitter: [@empanadasaqui](https://twitter.com/empanadasaqui), Instagram: [@empanadasaqui](https://www.instagram.com/empanadasaqui)*

Banasun Fruit Bar

Comfort food need not be greasy—in fact, you know you'll be more comfortable in the long run if it isn't. So next time you're feeling tender, try a BanaGreens smoothie, a dead-simple mix of kale, peanut butter, and alkaline water, topped with a sprinkle of ground almonds. Owner Michael Kroeger will sometimes bestow free smoothies on customers who are willing to show off in public—that is, perform burpees or push-ups or some other smoothie-worthy physical activity. Worth it. *Catch Them At: Fountain Square, (513) 601-8686, facebook.com/BanaSunFruitBar, Twitter: [@banasunfb](https://twitter.com/banasunfb), Instagram: [@banasunfb](https://www.instagram.com/banasunfb)*

New Orleans To Go

The key word here is “scale.” This is not the kind of food that keeps well, so don't go with this truck unless you're prepared to throw down on a mammoth fried po'boy sandwich (catfish or shrimp) and a pile of cheese grits or sweet potato fries. Seriously, it's enough food for three people. And yes, you want the spicy honey. Keep your eye on the menu board for Cajun specials like crawfish, jambalaya, and the muffuletta sandwich. *Catch Them At: 4665 Cornell Rd., Blue Ash, (513) 833-1342, neworleanstogopoboy.com, facebook.com/mardigrasmad, Twitter: [@NewOrleansToGo](https://twitter.com/NewOrleansToGo)*

C'est Cheese

These folks could not be more jazzed about grilled cheese. From a full menu of 30-odd iterations, they'll choose four or five to feature in their food truck, along with Hen of the Woods chips and (in colder months) tomato soup. The Cheesy Wonder is almost always represented, since it's a classic blend of four cheeses on thick Italian bread. Look out for The Bee Sting, with mozzarella, pepperoni, basil-infused honey, and chili-flaked butter. It's like a grilled cheese pizza. If your 12-year-old self could see you now.... *Catch Them At: Procter & Gamble, cestcheesecincy.com, (513) 535-8857, facebook.com/CestCheeseCincy, Twitter: [@cestcheesecincy](https://twitter.com/cestcheesecincy), Instagram: [@cestcheesecincy](https://www.instagram.com/cestcheesecincy)*