

THE STORY

Since September 2006, Melt Bar and Grilled in Lakewood has offered gourmet grilled cheese sandwiches and all kinds of beers (around 150 at any given time, 20 or so on tap) in a relaxed, comfortable—and often full to capacity—atmosphere. It provides a break from ordinary bar food and the often predictable selection of brews that accompany it, and it does so in a setting that provides something for nearly everyone.

Don't believe it? Well, the menu ranges from simple – the plain grilled cheese sandwich (the “Kindergarten,” which can be augmented with almost anything one can think of), the Reuben, a gyro—to outré, such as November's offering, the New Bomb Turkey (basically, the whole turkey-with-trimmings on a sandwich) and the immensely popular Parmageddon, which adds pierogies and fresh Napa vodka kraut to the basic grilled cheese. (Menu staples are constantly complemented by monthly specials.) And as for the ambience, Melt boasts an incredible array of Cleveland photography, sports memorabilia, a local-artists' wall, more local art, and unobtrusive video selections including sporting events, musical performances, and cartoons. Perhaps that's why owner Matt Fish describes it as “an entity, not a restaurant,” and compares it to an event.

Fish, who's been a chef for the past 17 years in area establishments ranging from Johnny Mango to Fat Fish Blue, opened Melt to specialize in what he terms “comfort food dressed up”... an idea which evolved from his lifelong appreciation for the grilled cheese sandwich. (“It's simple, it's good, it's filling,” he points out, “and it's easy to keep bread and cheese around.”) As the concept evolved over the years—from learning the ropes of restaurant management in the classroom

and in the kitchen, and from his observations of other ideas he'd investigated while on the road as a touring musician – he just let it grow “organically,” in his words. (“There was no scientific method to it,” he explains.) About four years before opening, that concept was mostly finalized, right down to the basic menu.

The deeper background to the Melt story is almost as simple as that basic grilled cheese sandwich. Working closely with ownership in a small-staff, family-oriented setting piqued Matt's interest in not only making good food, but deriving an atypical experience from many people's workaday reality. Following culinary school and the aforementioned restaurant management instruction, he was in “no hurry,” as he puts it, to establish his longtime goal – especially as a few more important components had to be assembled. One was to be an active contributor to his local community (Melt's suppliers include Lakewood-based butchers, produce suppliers, and beverage distributors, and it also takes part in a number of community festivals and gatherings); the other might have been a little bit harder to develop.

That's the “Melt family.” As Fish describes it, that idea encompasses “me, the staff, the customers...we're all part of Melt.” From the “Friends of Melt” monthly emails to the



minimal nature of his rules for employees—“Have fun, be friendly, and work hard,” and that's pretty much it—it almost comes as no surprise that Melt regulars are numerous and visit frequently. From locals who might stop in twice a week to the monthly patrons who drive from as far as an hour away, it's this last detail that really crystallizes the Melt experience. (To understand how that works a little bit better, Matt describes his staffing theory as such: “I want the customers to meet the real person, not The Restaurant.”) And while that may sound a tad overblown, Melt has more than doubled in size since it opened, adding not only the other half of its building's floor space but also an outdoor patio; the employee rolls are now up to 45 or so and the hours have expanded more than once. Those are hard facts, not hyperbole.

Now serving an estimated average of 500 grilled cheese sandwiches of one variety or another every day—not accounting for any of the other menu options, not to mention the beers—Matt still manages to meet his goal: To have fun. The vision doesn't exactly end there, however. Next on the agenda is the opening of an East Side Melt in Cleveland Heights, which will follow the original plan as closely as possible. Beyond that? Matt Fish can speak for himself: “Let's push it and see how far we can take it,” he enthuses.²

THE RESTAURANT



Melt Bar & Grilled, Lakewood Ohio. Dining area and bar.



Melt Bar & Grilled, Lakewood Ohio. Patio.



Melt Bar & Grilled, Lakewood Ohio. Kitchen.

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WWW.MELTBARANDGRILLED.COM/PRESS

THE FOOD



Melt Bar & Grilled, The Monte Cristo.



Melt Bar & Grilled, Southwest Salad.



Melt Bar & Grilled, Peanut Butter Banana Gourmet Waffles.

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THE PEOPLE



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