What is the hot dog origin?

The humble hot dog, a centerpiece of Americana, evokes fond images of ballparks, cookouts, and condiment-covered bliss. But how did the hot dog come to be? Where did the hot dog get its name? And why can't we ever eat enough of them?

It turns out, the history of the hot dog is as much the mystery of the hot dog, as its origins are shrouded in controversy and competing claims. Let's start at the beginning… *way* back in the beginning.

Hot dogs in the ancient world

Hot dogs are a kind of sausage, which may date back to the 7th century BCE, when Homer mentioned a sausage in his epic poem *The Odyssey*. Centuries later, around 64 CE, Emperor Nero's cook Gaius starred in a sausage legend of his own, when it is said that he "discovered" them.

At the time, pigs were customarily starved the week before they were to be cooked and served. According to the popular telling, one pig was roasted but had not been properly cleaned. Gaius ran a knife into the pig's belly to see if it was fit to eat. To his great surprise, the pig's puffed up intestines popped out of the roast. Gaius supposedly said, "I have discovered something of great importance," and proceeded to stuff the intestines with ground venison, ground beef, cooked ground wheat, and spices, tying them into sections as he went.

Hot dogs in Europe

As time rolled on, Europeans embraced sausages in their cuisine, particularly across Germany. The Germans created hundreds of versions of sausages to pair with kraut and beer.

Two different European towns now claim to be the birthplace of the hot dog: Frankfurt, Germany and Vienna, Austria.

Frankfurt (officially Frankfurt am Main) claims that the hot dog was invented there in 1487, pointing to the word *frankfurter* as proof of the hot dog's roots in the city. In fact, in 1987, Frankfurt threw a huge celebration honoring the 500th anniversary of the hot dog.

Rather than dating the hot dog to five years before Columbus sailed the ocean blue, however, the city of Vienna claims that the hot dog began there in the late 19th century. According to Vienna (*Wien* in German, hence the name *wiener* or *wienerwurst*), Austro-Hungarians Emil Reichel and Sam Ladany lived there when they invented the hot dog. The pair then went on to sell their creation at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago.

Even if Reichel and Ladany were not the first to invent the hot dog, they probably *were* the first to invent the Chicago-style hot dog, with its signature toppings of bright green relish, dill pickle spear, tomato slices, pickled peppers, and celery salt. Reichel and Ladany are the cofounders of Vienna Beef, the Chicago-based hot dog manufacturer that remains at the heart of the city's cuisine even today, over a century since it began.

To complicate matters even further, Johann Georghehner is another name sometimes credited with inventing the hot dog. Georghehner was a butcher who lived in Coburg, Germany in the late 1600s, more than 100 years after the 1487 date touted by the city of Frankfurt. According to these reports, Georghehner traveled to Frankfurt to promote his new food, and *that's* when the hot dog was born.

Confused yet? Well, just wait. There's more confusion to add to the picture.

Hot dogs in America

As Europeans came to the United States throughout the late 19th century, sausage vending became a relatively inexpensive startup business for upwardly mobile immigrants.

Sausage carts were a fixture of urban life. The *Duluth News Tribune* described Chicago this way in September 1894:

“More numerous than the lunch wagon is the strolling salesman of ‘red hots.’ This individual clothed in ragged trousers, a white coat and cook’s cap, and unlimited cheek, obstructs the night prowler at every corner. He carries a tank in which are swimming and sizzling hundreds of Frankforters or Wieners.”



Street peddlers provided much of the everyday food the less affluent public consumed at the turn of the century. Their wares were not only convenient and inexpensive, but they may also have been a wise choice. In 1906, the same year that Upton Sinclair published his novel *The Jungle* to expose the harsh conditions of the meat-packing industry, a study by a health commission in New York City concluded that street food was actually fresher than the food sold in fixed-location restaurants. Hawkers, after all, got their food straight from the wholesale markets and had no means to store it overnight.

What is the difference between sausages and hot dogs?

Sausage is a broad term that can describe any ground meat encased with herbs and spices. Casings may be either natural or synthetic. Hot dogs are a type of sausage.

The meat in a hot dog is more finely ground than the meat in a sausage, giving the hot dog a smoother texture. The spice mix in a hot dog is generally milder than in a sausage.
But the sausage didn't really become a hot dog until it was paired with its signature bun. So whom should we credit for that innovation?

Who introduced the hot dog bun?

Germans traditionally serve bread with sausages, but who invented the modern hot dog bun? On this topic, too, there is controversy. Because street-meat vendors walked every city block in the late 1800s, it's hard to know who did what first. But we do know that some stories that persist on the internet are definitely *not* true.

Where the hot dog bun was NOT born: St. Louis

According to one myth, the hot dog roll was introduced around 1880, when German peddler Antoine Feuchtwanger sold hot sausages on the streets of St. Louis, Missouri. So that his customers would not burn their hands or get themselves greasy, the story goes, Feuchtwanger would supply them with white gloves. The problem was, customers would take the gloves and walk off with them, eating into his profits.
Allegedly, Feuchtwanger's wife suggested putting the sausages on a split bun instead, calling on her brother (a baker), to improvise a long, soft roll to cradle the hot sausages. As the story goes, the concessionaire then went on to sell them at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, and *voilà*! The hot dog bun was born.
There's only one problem with this story: the hot dog bun had been known for many years before. Barry Popik, a renowned etymologist and consulting editor of the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America*, painstakingly cited examples from printed news stories dating as far back as 1843. Besides, what street food vendor would offer expensive gloves that would need to be cleaned between customers (if they were even returned)? It doesn't make any sense.
More likely, because Feuchtwanger was from Bavaria, a city that borders Vienna, he took up the wiener trade in St. Louis to capitalize on the region's heavy settlement of Germans of many different dialects, religious persuasions, and sausage traditions.

Where the hot dog bun may have been born: Coney Island

Around 1867, Charles Feltman opened what may have been the first hot dog cart on Coney Island.

Originally from Hannover, Germany, Feltman owned a pie-wagon that delivered freshly baked pies to Coney Island inns and saloons. Customers hoped the baker would add hot sandwiches to his offerings, but the wagon was too small to accommodate the variety of ingredients. Perhaps, Feltman thought, something simple like a sausage on a roll could serve as a hot lunch option.

Feltman consulted with the wheel-wright who had built the original pie-wagon. The wheel-wright added a tin-lined chest to keep the rolls fresh and rigged a small charcoal stove inside to boil sausages. According to great-grandson Charles Robert Feltman, Feltman's bakery sold 3,684 pork sausages on a bun in its first year.

Feltman went on to build something of an empire on the Coney Island boardwalk, consisting of a hotel, beer gardens, restaurants, rides, and even a ballroom. He claimed an all-time record of serving 100,000 people and 40,000 hot dogs in a single day.

But Feltman's contribution to hot dog history is at least partly romanticized. According to historian Bruce Kraig, author of *Man Bites Dog: Hot Dog Culture in America*, there is no good evidence of Feltman's sausage cart. And as a fine-dining restaurateur, Feltman deplored the small booths and food stands that had multiplied near his seaside businesses. So who's to say? ¯_(ツ)_/¯

Who introduced the hot dog bun? The most likely answer

Another Coney Island baker likely played a central role in inventing the hot dog bun. Ignatz Frischman arrived in New York from Austria before 1850. According to his 1904 *New York Times* obituary, Frischman "observed that the crowds [at Coney Island]… displayed a fondness for

frankfurter sandwiches. In those days the frankfurter was served to the hungry pleasure seekers between two slices of bread. It occurred to Mr. Frishman that it would be more delectable tucked in the depths of a Vienna roll of special size."

The pioneering baker "sold to the frankfurter men in small quantities for a while, and at a small profit, until they became the only means by which the frankfurter could be sold," wrote the *Iola Daily Record*. The *Brooklyn Daily Times* said, "when Frischman opened his modest little bakery and started the manufacture of a certain oblong roll that the frankfurter men needed in their business, 'Coney' sprang into the limelight… Visitors to Coney Island did not feel as though they had 'done' the resort thoroughly without devouring a hot 'frankfurter and.'

What's more, that same skeptical historian Bruce Kraig conceded, "I don't see why the Frischman story can't be true. His creation was emulated by many afterward." Well, hot diggety dog! That's about as straight an answer as you'll find on this topic.

Unfortunately, this leads us to a murkier question…

How did the hot dog get its name?

Are you ready for more lies? Because this part of the story includes a ton of them.

Myth #1: A baseball game and hot dog cartoon

Supposedly, the term *hot dog* was coined on a frigid April day around 1901 or 1902, at a Giants baseball game at the New York Polo grounds. Due to the weather, concessionaire Harry Stevens wasn't making any money selling ice cream and cold sodas. He sent his salesmen to buy all the rolls and dachshund sausages (named for the shape of the German dog breed they resembled) they could find. Soon, the vendors were back, yelling "They're red hot! Get your dachshund sausages while they're red hot!"

Here, the story goes awry. From the press box, T.A. "TAD" Dorgan, a sports cartoonist for the *New York Evening Journal*, was searching for ideas to sketch. Hearing the hawkers, he drew a cartoon of a dachshund dog nestled in a bun. But TAD didn't know how to spell *dachshund*. So his caption simply read, "Hot dog!"

The problem? Dorgan didn't even come to New York until 1903. And despite volumes of his other work, there is no record of this infamous cartoon.

This origin myth may have been circulated by Harry Stevens himself. He had, for many years, told reporters versions of the story, and shortly before TAD's death in 1929, the first example of the coining tale appeared in a newspaper.

"It's a charming piece of Americana," Dr. Gerald Cohen, co-author of the 2004 book *Origin of the Term "Hot Dog",* said. "But it's a complete fabrication."

Dorgan, Cohen explains, "did use the term later and probably helped popularize it. But his first two 'hot dog' cartoons came on Dec. 12 and 13, 1906, in connection with a six-day bike race at Madison Square Garden, not a baseball game at the Polo Grounds."

In another book, Cohen goes further to refute the TAD myth. He cites a 1926 newspaper article quoting Harry Stevens telling a new story:

"I have been given credit for introducing the hot dog to America. Well, I don't deserve it. In fact, at first I couldn't see the idea. It was my son, Frank, who first got the idea and wanted to try it on one of the early six-day bicycle crowds at Madison Square Garden. I told Frank that the bike fans preferred ham and cheese. He insisted that we try it out for a few days, and at last I consented. His insistence has all Americans eating hot dogs."

Don't believe everything you read.

Myth #2: A different baseball game and a hot dog vendor

A less well-circulated story takes us back to St. Louis. On June 3, 1903, Adolf Gehring was selling food at a baseball game. Being a particularly successful day, Gehring sold out of everything. When he went back to the baker to buy bread, there was nothing left but some long dinner rolls. Gehring bought the rolls, as well as all the sausages and wieners that the butcher had. Returning to the stands with his "meat sandwiches," as he called them, a man in the crowd supposedly shouted, "Give me one of those damn dogs." The phrase, it's said, then caught on, and soon everyone was yelling for hot dogs.

Evidence for this story is about as thin as its details. Gehring claimed he not only invented the name, but the hot dog itself. But he was a few decades too late.

So how did the hot dog get its name, for real?

It turns out, the term *hot dog* grew out of crude jokes and college humor. Few people want to know "how the sausage gets made." Feared ingredients such as dogs, rats, cats, and even humans have been rumored to be in cased meats since at least the Middle Ages.

Therefore, said Cohen, "the term was based on a popular 19th-century belief that dog meat could turn up in sausages, and this belief had basis in fact." If this seems far-fetched, meat-packers at the time also added sawdust, formaldehyde, and other fillers to sausages. To make things worse, cities had little, if any, organized garbage disposal or clean water delivery.

In this milieu, pushcarts would congregate near college dorms where they became known as "dog wagons," a name deriding the questionable origin of the meat.

"College students since time immemorial have combined a keen sense of wit with occasional bad taste," Cohen says. "Both came into play in referring to a hot sausage as 'hot dog.' The term at first was disgusting, but of course it gradually caught on."

Many university humor magazines, such as those from Harvard, Princeton, and Cornell, demonstrate that the term *hot dog* was well-known by 1900. In fact, the October 5, 1895 edition of the *Yale Record* includes a poem about "The Kennel Club," a dog wagon that had opened a year before. This facetiousness, along with the association to German dachshunds, linked sausages to dogs ever since.

Even earlier instances of the term *hot dog* may be found in print, including one from December 1892 in Paterson, New Jersey's *Daily Press*. Newspapers played a central role in popularizing neologisms and slang of the time, as wire services enabled small-town readers to follow what was happening in big cities and immigrant communities. Idioms such as "for crying out loud," "to see red," and "makin' whoopee" joined "hot dog" and "weenie roasts" among the era's contributions.

Though the danger of canine meat in hot dogs no longer exists, the jokes, questions, and innuendos persist even today. But so does our collective

love and cultural devotion to the humble hot dog, which never seems to fade from popular culture. The hot dog is, as a widespread joke from the 1930s goes, the noblest kind of dog: for it does not bite the hand that feeds it; it feeds the hand that bites it.

Today's hot dog

Hot dog history continues to evolve, as the beloved American treat is enjoyed at home and across the world. Regional versions have arisen from the endless ways to serve a hot dog.

In Seattle, top your hot dog with cream cheese. In Alaska, look for reindeer dogs accompanied by Coca-Cola grilled onions.

Travel abroad to Iceland, where lamb hot dogs (*pylsur*) are served with onions, ketchup, sweet brown mustard, and remoulade.

In Chile, try *el completo*, a hot dog that's twice the size of the American version, served with chopped tomatoes, avocados, sauerkraut, and a huge dollop of mayonnaise.



New variations keep developing, but you don't have to dress up a hot dog with a lot of fancy trappings to like it. The plainest hot dog is still a cured meat spiced with pepper, garlic, coriander, cinnamon, cumin, nutmeg, paprika, and allspice.

The meat is usually beef or pork, trimmed from larger cuts like roasts, chops, and tenderloins. You can also find hot dog varieties made of chicken or turkey. And though you may have heard urban legends about how hot dogs are made of a bunch of leftover parts, meat science expert Dr. Janeal Yancey explains that hot dogs are made of "the same stuff that you make into ground beef or ground pork.

The trimmings used to make hot dogs are pieces of meat that don't make good steaks and roasts because they aren't a certain tenderness, size, shape, or weight."

It's not surprising, then, that in 2021, Americans spent $7.4 billion on hot dogs. Hot dogs are especially popular in the summer months, enjoyed at a ballpark or Fourth of July cookout. The average American eats 70 hot dogs per year.

What is the largest selling hot dog brand in America?

The most popular brand of hot dog in the US is Nathan's, followed by Hebrew National and Oscar Meyer.
Nathan's has a long history dating back to 1916 when Nathan Handwerker opened his Coney Island hot dog stand on Surf Avenue in Brooklyn, New York.
His business was so successful that he was able to expand into several other locations throughout Brooklyn and New York City before it was bought out by Oscar Mayer (the company behind Ball Park Franks) in 1990 for $20 million.

What is the most expensive hot dog on record?

The most expensive hot dog on record was sold at New York City's Serendipity 3 restaurant for $69 in 2012. It was made with Kobe beef and topped with black truffles, a delicacy that can cost hundreds of dollars per pound.
The price tag was no doubt justified by the fact that it was served on January 1st, the first day of the new year—and perhaps also because it was one of only 10 made.
A second contender for most expensive hot dog would be Chicago's The Wiener's Circle, which sells a "2-Pounder" for $14 (a bargain compared to Serendipity).
To ensure this frankfurter stays true to tradition, its owners purchase Vienna Beef franks from their local supplier and cook them on old-fashioned grills behind the counter.

Hot dogs are an American tradition

When you're talking about hot dogs, there's a lot to say. Hot dogs are an American tradition, and they're a common food at baseball games, picnics and family gatherings across the country.
In fact, it's estimated that Americans consume 20 billion hot dogs each year and there's even a holiday to, well, eat hot dogs – National Hot Dog Day. And National Chili Dog Day. And, even, National Corn Dog Day.

Wrapping up hot dog history

Well, there you have it.
The history of the hot dog is long and storied, but the end result remains the same: hot dogs are a delicious and popular part of American cuisine that almost everyone loves to eat. So next time you're grilling up some dogs for your kids or friends or yourself—or all three!—remember the rich past of this iconic dish.
Remember how much we owe to German immigrants for bringing it over, and how much we owe to fast food vendors for making it accessible to everyone.
The history of the hot dog is a history worth knowing.

Hot Dog FAQs

Who invented the hot dog?

It's hard to say definitively who invented the hot dog, but credit has gone to Emil Reichel and Sam Ladany (the co-founders of Vienna Beef) and Johann Georghehner, a German butcher.
The hot dog was invented in Germany and named after the German word for "dachshund," which literally translates to "badger dog." The dachshund is a type of short-legged, elongated dog bred for hunting badgers. It's also one of the oldest breeds, with evidence showing that it dates back to at least 1564.
Over time, Germans began calling this sausage-in-a-bread roll a "frankfurter" or "wuerstchen" because it came from Frankfurt or Wuerzburg (two cities in Germany). Americans had other ideas when they heard about these sausages being sold by street vendors in Europe: they called them "hot dogs" because they were eaten at ball games on cold days.
But no one is entirely sure.

Why are they called franks or wieners?

Hot dogs are called franks, short for *frankfurters*, because they may have begun in Frankfurt, Germany. Hot dogs are

called *wieners* because they may have begun in Vienna, Austria, which is *wien* in German.

When was the hot dog invented?
Sausages date all the way back to ancient times, but the hot dog is first found mentioned in print in the late 1800s.
Where was the hot dog invented?

There is no definitive answer, but Frankfurt, Germany and Vienna, Austria both take credit for the invention of the hot dog.
How the hot dog got it's name?

There are several myths about how the hot dog got its name, but the most likely origin is 19th century college humor, when students would make crude jokes pertaining to the questionable origin of the meat in hot dogs.
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Why are hot dogs red?

Hot dogs are red because sodium nitrite is added to cure the meat, add flavor, and prevent the growth of bacteria. Sodium nitrite is also added to bacon, cold cuts, and Spam.
What's the difference between a kosher style hot dog and a regular hot dog?
The main difference between kosher style hot dogs and regular hot dogs is that kosher style hot dogs are made with ingredients that are permissible under Jewish dietary laws, while regular hot dogs do not. This means that kosher style hot dogs—which can be made of beef or chicken, but never pork—must have a certain percentage of meat in

them; they must be prepared according to strict rules regarding what kinds of utensils are used (no mixing meat and milk!) in order to be considered kosher.
You'll often see them served on rolls or buns, with mustard on top for dipping purposes.