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50 signature foods of metro Detroit

BY SYLVIA RECTOR
FREE PRESS RESTAURANT CRITIC

What's on our Fourth of July table?

This much is certain: You won't find metro Detroit's collective menu anywhere else in America.

It's coney's, hummus, Greek salads and peach cobbler ... artisan bread, pad thai, berry pie and baklava ... square pizzas, sliders and salsa. It's Faygo and Vernors, Redcoat Tavern and Miller's, Buddy's and Little Caesars.

It's not all gourmet. But it surely is *us*.

What we eat says much about who we are. So on this most American of holidays, we went looking for the foods and flavors that define Detroit -- the ones that best tell the story of our geography, our diverse backgrounds, our history and even our future.

Some of our 50 picks were invented here; others are transplants. Some occur almost nowhere else; others are commonplace but so essential to our identity, Detroit wouldn't be the same without them.

This is not a "best of" list. It is not arranged as a ranking. And it is not about the whole mitten of Michigan. It's about metro Detroit -- and of course, it's entirely subjective, which means everyone will have other ideas.

And if you haven't tasted all 50, we encourage you to seek them out this summer.

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The List

American Coney Island hot dog: We could combine the rival, side-by-side American and Lafayette Coney Islands into one listing, but they're so important to Detroit food love and lore, each deserves its own paragraph. Coney dogs -- for better or worse -- are Detroit's unofficial official dish, and the American, at 114 W. Lafayette, has been serving them since Greek immigrant Gust Keros opened the place in 1917. Fans of the American love the snap of its natural-casing dogs, made by Dearborn Sausage Co.

Lafayette Coney Island hot dog: Fans of the smaller, timeworn Lafayette prefer its chili and extol its grittier atmosphere. Founded in 1924 by Gust Keros' brother, Bill, the Lafayette -- at 118 W. Lafayette -- was sold about 20 years ago to its employees. Whether you favor American or Lafayette, their

rivalry is part of their appeal.

Kowalski kielbasa: Who can imagine Hamtramck without the 85-year-old Kowalski brand -- or its sausage-shaped sign on Holbrook? And what would backyard barbecues and tailgates be without that most Polish of sausages, kielbasa? Together, they're six syllables of hometown flavor.

Perch: Great Lakes native yellow perch are among Lake Erie's most abundant species. No wonder they show up on fine-dining and sports-bar menus alike. Delicate, fresh and local, they're a real taste of home. Photo at Moose MacGregor's, Brownstown Township.

Faygo: This fruity soft drink brand was created 103 years ago in Detroit by the Feigenson Brothers Bottling Works. But the name was too long to fit on bottles, so it was changed to Faygo in 1921. Some 50 flavors are available, but Redpop remains No. 1 in sales. Faygo is still bottled on Gratiot in Detroit.

Vernors: Claimed to be the oldest soft drink brand in America, this sweet, fizzy, gingery drink was created by Detroit pharmacist James Vernor around 1866, after his return from the Civil War. Whether folks love it or can't stand it, most agree there's nothing quite like it. Vernors is the signature ingredient in another Detroit invention, the Boston Cooler vanilla ice cream float.

McClure's pickles: How fitting that these hand-packed, dilled and spicy spears are taking the country by storm and putting metro Detroit -- the birthplace of Vlasic -- back on the pickle map. Born in Beverly Hills and produced in Troy from great-grandma's recipe, McClure's pickles have been featured on the Food Network and in gourmet magazines and food media all over the country.

Apples: With orchards dotting the landscape from New Boston to Ortonville to Armada, apple-picking and pie-baking have been fall rituals here for generations. It's easy to forget that Northern Spies, Paula Reds and Honey Crisps don't hang from trees everywhere.

Cider and cider-mill doughnuts: Fresh-pressed or pasteurized, cider just tastes better at a cider mill, sipped from a plastic cup while batting away the bees and eating soft, cinnamon-y doughnuts just out of the fryer. They're how fall tastes here.

Pierogi: Polish or not, metro Detroiters love these savory dumplings stuffed with cheese, potato, sauerkraut or mushrooms. They're on the menu at every Polish restaurant, and lately they've begun showing up with gourmet fillings at high-end places. Photo at Under the Eagle restaurant, Hamtramck.

Pita and hummus: As home to one of the country's largest Middle Eastern communities, the availability and quality of our Mediterranean food are some of the best in the country. Nothing symbolizes the cuisine better than the simple but iconic combo of hot, fresh-baked pitas and satiny hummus. Photo at La Pita, Dearborn.

Shatila sweets: The exquisitely detailed Middle Eastern baklava, cookies and other sweets prepared by this nationally known store and bakery on West Warren in Dearborn are shipped to customers all over the country -- indeed, the world. The baklava are made with layers of paper-thin pastry, pure butter, nuts and sugar syrup.

Better Made potato chips: Founded in 1930, Better Made celebrates its 80th anniversary Aug. 1. Its red-and-yellow bags show up at picnics, tailgates, family reunions and lunch tables all over metro Detroit. Fifty million pounds of potatoes, mostly from Michigan, get turned into chips every year at Better Made's plant on Gratiot.

Evie's Tamales: Founder Evelyn Grimaldo's little Mexicantown restaurant sells 100-200 dozen tamales a day, each still wrapped by hand in corn husks and served steaming and aromatic. Opened 28 years ago, Evie's isn't the biggest of Mexicantown's many long-established restaurants, but its

signature tamales have made it a word-of-mouth success.

Taqueria tacos: It's not hard anymore to find real Mexican food in southwest Detroit, where dozens of small taquerias and other eateries dot the neighborhoods to serve a rapidly growing Hispanic population. Authentic Mexican tacos -- small, double-stacked, soft-corn tortillas topped simply with meat, cilantro and onion -- are worth seeking out.

Craft beers: Detroit's once-huge brewing industry saw its last big brand, Stroh's, shut its brewery doors here in 1985. But a new generation of craft-beer entrepreneurs from Rochester to Lincoln Park and Clinton Township to Detroit is restoring the tradition with distinctive, quality brews in every imaginable style.

The Hummer: Numerous cocktails and other liquid concoctions were born in Detroit's heydays. While many have gone away, the Hummer -- a dessert drink of vanilla ice cream, white rum and Kahlua -- survives. What's not to like about a spiked milk shake? The Bayview Yacht Club claims its invention. Photo at the Rattlesnake Club, Detroit.

Spaghetti and meatballs at Roma Café: Some of our oldest, most storied restaurant names are Italian -- Larco's, Lelli's and Mario's among them. But the granddaddy of them all is the Roma Cafe in Eastern Market, serving classic Italian food since 1890. The big menu has dozens of dishes, but if you have to pick one, nothing represents old-school Italian-American better than spaghetti and meatballs.

Maurice Salad: Said to have been created by a chef at J.L. Hudson's downtown Detroit department store, this recipe features shredded iceberg with a mayo-based dressing, julienned deli ham and turkey, sweet pickles and Swiss cheese. Quite gourmet in its day, it still sells well at local Macy's cafés and other restaurants. Photo at the Caucus Club, Detroit.

Greek salad: Metro Detroit (and by extension, Michigan) appears to be the only place in the country where Greek salads routinely include beets. Why they were used isn't clear; maybe the dark red vegetables were a cheap way to add color to the bowl. Regardless, we love our Greek salads and the tangy dressings that go with them.

Martha's Vineyard Salad: The late Chuck Muer and his restaurants gave us many dishes that became classics, including this salad made with blue cheese, dried cherries, pine nuts, red onion and maple-raspberry dressing. Northville chef Chuck (Rocky) Rachwitz, then Muer's corporate chef, says he created it after Muer asked for a special salad and signature dressing; it went on the menu at Charley's Crab in Troy around 1984. Countless chefs and home cooks have copied and tweaked the recipe. Some recipe collections and menus call it simply Michigan Salad.

Germack pistachios: For many metro Detroiters, the holidays wouldn't be the same without a big bag of Germack pistachios. Dating to 1924, the family-owned Germack Pistachio Co. in Eastern Market is the oldest processor and roaster of pistachios in America. The nuts were almost unknown in the U.S. when the Germack brothers began importing them for the Mediterranean and eastern European immigrants flooding the country in the early 1900s.

Barbecued ribs: Smoke. Meat. Sauce. Umm-um-umm. Detroit loves fallin'-off-the-bone baby-back ribs, cooked over hot coals and mopped with a sweet-and-tangy sauce made from a secret family recipe. The grills manned by Uncle Tony's Catering in front of Bert's Marketplace are a familiar sight at Eastern Market.

Slows Bar B Q pulled-pork sandwich: Known for its cool and its 'cue, Slows in Corktown is the place in metro Detroit for barbecue and cold brew. Its pulled pork sandwich, served topped with slaw, is the place to start. Chef Brian Perrone named it The Reason for a reason.

Paczki: Like over-filled doughnuts on steroids, the rich, fat-laden paczki -- pronounced POONCH-kee -- were popularized in the 1980s and '90s by Polish bakeries in Hamtramck as pre-Lenten treats on

Fat Tuesday. Now they're sold by the thousands of dozens, far beyond Hamtramck, at supermarkets, convenience stores and bakeries of all kinds.

Sliders: With their smushed, quarter-inch-thick beef patties, grilled or steamed onions, paper-thin dill slices and cottony buns, the inexpensive, old-school sliders have a loyal following here. An inordinate number of small, boxy, white-sided slider-diners from the '50s and before still operate here, including Bates, Bray's, Telway, Greene's and Hunter House.

Ray's Ice Cream: In a metro area filled with ice cream producers and ice cream shops, family-owned Ray's in Royal Oak has been around since 1953. It makes more than 50 flavors at its Royal Oak plant, and customers line up out the door for flavors that range from Fat Elvis to Superman.

Guernsey Dairy ice cream: Founded in 1940 by John McGuire and still owned by the family, Guernsey Farms Dairy in Northville is an institution. People drive for miles just for its classic butter pecan, the top seller among its 48 flavors. It's tradition to let kids climb on the giant rock under the big tree out front.

Rack of Lamb Genghis Khan: Few fine-dining dishes become as well-known as Rack of Lamb Genghis Khan, a fixture on the menu of the 29-year-old Lark in West Bloomfield. It is prepared with a curry marinade and hoisin glaze, and the recipe was requested so often, owner Jim Lark had it printed and given automatically to guests who order the dish. The cards are numbered to show how many have been sold; it's now almost 69,000.

HoneyBaked Ham: Detroit -- a ham-loving town if ever there was one -- is not only home to HoneyBaked, it's the birthplace of the spiral slicer. Company founder Harry Hoenselaar invented the gizmo in his basement using an electric drill motor, a butcher knife and a broomstick. When he couldn't sell it to the meat industry, he went into business in 1957 selling perfectly sliced hams with a honey glaze.

Corned beef: Not every city has great corned beef like Detroit's. We're home to at least three outstanding corned-beef brands -- Grobbel's, Wigley's and Sy Ginsberg. And anyone who can't find a terrific corned-beef-on-rye around here just isn't looking. Try an Irish bar, almost any place in Eastern Market or a great Jewish deli. Photo at Star Deli, Southfield.

Little Caesars pizza: A whole pie for \$5? A pizza that's hot and ready when you walk in the door? Little Caesars may not be gourmet, but there's something very Detroit about putting a pizza within everyone's reach. Founded by the Ilitch family, Little Caesars is the hometown brand that went national.

Pad Thai at Bangkok Cuisine: It wouldn't be metro Detroit without little Thai places dotting strip malls everywhere, but it wasn't always this way. Somnuk (Sandy) Arpachinda claims credit for opening the area's first Thai restaurant, Bangkok Cuisine, in Sterling Heights in 1983. Today, she has seven locations. Thai isn't considered very exotic anymore, but we'll always get cravings for pad Thai.

Alinosi spumoni: Food Network says the Alinosi company's handmade premium spumoni is some of the best in the country, which comes as no surprise to anyone who's had it. It's an Italian thing -- a festive ice cream trio that, at Alinosi's, features pistachio, chocolate and rum-flavored vanilla, laced with candied fruit. Produced in Detroit since 1921, it's sold at Italian markets, old-time restaurants and the company's former retail shop, now the Chocolate Bar Café, in Grosse Pointe Woods.

Coney Island breakfasts: Eggs, meat (or meats), a huge slab of hash browns, toast, little plastic tubs of jelly, ditto butter. Coffee in a mug. Food served hot in 10 minutes. Handwritten bill. Cheap. Filling. Great anytime. It's so us. Photo at Leo's Coney Island, Dearborn.

Avalon International Breads: From Detroit's Cass Corridor come some of the region's best artisan breads. Made with organic ingredients, Avalon's products are sold in specialty markets and served in top restaurants across the area. Owners Jackie Victor and Ann Perrault are among a core group of

visionary food people investing in Detroit.

Ball Park Franks: Still served at Comerica Park, the Ball Park brand originated after Detroit Tigers owner John Fetzer held a contest in 1957 to find the best dog to serve fans. The brand later went national and now is owned by Sara Lee, but we still remember why and where it was born.

Muer bread: These hot, soft, yeast-scented rolls don't really have a name, but you'll find variations of them at restaurants all around metro Detroit. Shaped like rolls or turned into long, skinny loaves, the bread is brushed with herbed olive oil and sometimes topped with poppy seeds. It began at the Chuck Muer restaurants in the early '80s, shaped from the company's pizza dough as a way to serve house-made bread rather than buy it from a third party. Many chefs who worked for Muer over the years replicated the recipe when they opened their own places, and customers still devour it. Photo at Steve & Rocky's, Novi.

Sanders Bumpy Cake: A signature treat from the confectionary company Fred Sanders founded in 1875, the Bumpy Cake is named for the rows of chocolate-covered white fluff across its top. If you see a Bumpy Cake, you know you're close to home. Morley Candy Makers of Clinton Township owns the Sanders brand and recipes now.

Miller's Bar hamburger: When people argue about who makes the best hamburger in metro Detroit, someone will always mention this Dearborn bar, where there's no written bill and no plates. The thick, no-frills burgers arrive on waxed paper; pickles are on a tray at the table. You can't claim to know hamburgers in metro Detroit if you haven't been to Miller's.

Redcoat Burger: Likewise, you have to have a classic Redcoat Burger at the original Redcoat Tavern in Royal Oak to have any credibility as a burger expert in these parts. The juicy beef is topped with sliced tomato, shredded lettuce and an onion-y mayo dressing; cheese is your call. There's always a line, but folks go anyway.

Fish and chips: Numerous fish-and-chips restaurants opened around Detroit after World War II, when soldiers came home and missed England's national dish. A handful of the old places are still going, including the 60-year-old Scotty Simpson's in Detroit. Looking for more? Wait for Lent and drop in at the traditional fish-fry dinners still held on Fridays at many churches.

Doughnuts: A workingman's town needed workingman's food, and doughnut shops were there to serve. Before there were chains like Dunkin' Donuts and Tim Horton's, there were dozens of local independents -- small, family-owned places like Dutch Girl Donuts on Woodward near 7 Mile. Its wonderfully fresh, fragrant doughnuts are still hand-made in small batches day and night by Gene Timmer and his son, Jon, and sold at the shop 24/7 except Sundays and holidays. Jon Timmer likes to point out that his cutting table is the one his grandfather, John, built when he opened the place in 1947.

Achatz Four-Berry Pie: Michigan fruit -- much from metro Detroit -- and Michigan-made and -grown ingredients make Achatz Handmade Pie Co.'s pies not only intensely local but intensely delicious. Founder Wendy Achatz began baking pies in her Armada basement 17 years ago; today the company has seven shops and sells through specialty markets and grocery stores. The signature Four-Berry Pie bursts with blackberries, blueberries, raspberries and tart cherries.

Sanders Hot Fudge Cream Puff: This is the dessert everyone names when they reminisce about going to Sanders ice cream parlors as kids -- hot fudge, ice cream and a crisp, light, cream-puff shell.

Sushi at Noble Fish: Is there a sushi-lover in metro Detroit who hasn't stood at the back of this Japanese market in Clawson, waiting for one of its sushi bar's 18 seats to open? Noble Fish wasn't the first sushi bar here, but its consistency and freshness have made it one of the most popular.

Garden Fresh salsa: In 1997, Ferndale barbecue-restaurant owner Jack Aronson decided to take a chance on something different: making salsa. From the first taste, people loved it and began coming

in just to buy the fresh, zesty product. It's now the No. 1 selling brand of fresh salsa in America, and nationally known Garden Fresh is producing chips and more.

Peach cobbler: With scores of soul-food restaurants dotting Detroit and its suburbs, you don't have to go far to find a taste of the South. And what could represent the area's Southern flavor better than a warm cobbler made with sweet, golden peaches?

Buddy's Pizza: Yes, there really is a Detroit-style pizza: a thick, square, Sicilian-inspired pie with a ton of cheese and a thick, slightly sweet tomato sauce. It was born in 1946 at Buddy's Rendezvous on Conant in Detroit, where then-owner Gus Guerra introduced it to try to build business -- which it did. Owners changed. Time passed. Employees came and left and opened their own places. Before many years, thick, square pizzas were showing up all over, looking a lot like the ones that came before them. There are dozens of greatly admired old-time Detroit-style pizza places, among them Cloverleaf in Eastpointe, Loui's in Hazel Park, and Shield's, with four locations. But history stuck a pin in the map on Conant, and that's where we'll leave it. The Buddy's chain has nine locations.

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Did we miss anything? Click the link below to tell us your favorites in the comments.
