

Memorable meal

When you order a hot dog at Johnny Chicago's, you won't forget it soon

By Josh Niva

Daily News correspondent

Johnny Chicago's

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\$-\$

Location: 751 E. 36th Ave.

Hours: 11 a.m. – 8:30 p.m.

Monday-Saturday,

11 a.m. – 8 p.m. Sunday

Phone: 244-2246

Options: Dine-in, takeout

Web: johnnychicagos.com

It has a franchise feel and a menu packed with fast food fundamentals, but Johnny Chicago's is fast food in look and efficiency only. It does favorites better than the quick-serve giants, offers a menu filled out by some American hand-food archetypes and delivers across-the-board consistency and quality that all restaurants should strive for.

Set in a strip mall at the busy Old Seward–36th Avenue intersection, Johnny Chicago's is locally co-owned and meticulously operated by foodie John Mayser.

Mayser ate his way around the world in the Air Force, but his heart never strayed from the Italian cooking and urban food he grew up eating. In recent years, he's shared his favorites with Alaskans. He ran the big Chicago's Best mobile food van here for a few summers, sold the van, then opened a spot on Elmendorf Air Force Base.

In June he expanded back into Anchorage proper, opening Johnny Chicago's.

The restaurant's signature items—the Chicago Dog and Italian Beef sandwiches—are superstars. The hamburgers are thick, made from chuck steak, charred outside, juicy inside. (My Smoking-Hot Chipotle Burger, \$6.25, experience smoked and tingled.) The salad options are all big, packed with texture and color (the Chopped, \$9.45, is a meal and then some), and made to order, unlike so many puny take-out salads that sit sadly waiting for a taker. Even the buns surprise—all are soft but remain sturdy no matter how big or bold the load they carry.

“That's generally our approach—fast food that really tastes great,” Mayser told me in a phone interview. “You eat at McDonalds and 10 minutes later you might not remember what you ate. When you eat our food, hopefully it has more resonance.”

There's no way you'll forget a Chicago Dog—it's a culinary classic, a food art masterpiece, a true joy to indulge in with your eyes and palate. Its foundation is solid—a rich Vienna beef brand frankfurter and a pillowy steamed bun adorned with black poppy seeds. Tucked on one side of the dog, tomato slices; on the other side, pickle slices. On top, neon green relish, onion chunks, a little yellow mustard, a sprinkle of celery salt and two tiny light-green sport peppers.

When built properly, colors and textures and flavors abound from every inch of the foot-long frame and all players appear in every bite: meat, sweet and heat, crunch, snap and dough. Johnny Chicago's staff certainly knows how to construct them. I've shared in five and each one looked and ate picture perfect.

Yes, I'm dedicating three paragraphs of a restaurant review to a hot dog. But anyone who scoffs at this dog isn't a true believer in the wonder of food. You don't have to love it, but it deserves appreciation. At



Bob Hallinen / Daily News archive 2010

Johnny Chicago's restaurant features classic Chicago style hot dogs, Italian beef sandwiches and chopped chicken salad with a bread stick. The new eatery is at the corner of 36th Avenue and the Old Seward Highway.

\$3.95, it's a bargain and only 45 cents more than Mayser charged from his food van more than five summers ago.

Less adventurous but equally reliable is the Italian beef sandwich (\$7.95). The simple version is a good, filling sandwich: a wad of wet, flavorful roast beef slices stuffed in the bowels of a hoagie-like bread. Your journey can go interesting places from there: add smooth provolone cheese (75 cents); roasted sweet peppers (50 cents); a subtle marinara and provolone (\$1.50); or small crunchy, colorful and peppery pickled

peppers and veggies known as giardiniera (50 cents). I'll never eat another without giardiniera. You can even add another delicious meat: the Beef 'N' Sausage sandwich (\$9.95) with the addition of marinara and cheese was a wet, wild and delicious ride. Through it all, the bread held up. Amazing.

I cruised Johnny Chicago's menu on multiple trips and the only item that didn't stand out was the french fries—my order of big crinkle-cut fries was soft and mealy. The wonderfully starchy, salty and saccharine sweet potato fries (\$2.25,

\$3.45 for a large) and big-and-crunchy beer-battered onion rings (\$3.95) more than make up for the spud duds.

During a visit, I peeked into Johnny Chicago's kitchen area and noticed a sign that read “Perfect Food. Perfect Order. Only.” It's a simple reminder to staff, but it could also be the restaurant's mission statement. Johnny Chicago's might have fast food features, but its dining ambition and execution are fine.