Yesterday
Is Today
in Sioux City's
Food Culture.

SLOW FOOD
Fast

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(Above) The exuberant sign at the
Tastee Inn & Out in Sioux City. The
restaurant's specialty tastees and onion
chips are legendary. (Right) Fast food
has an entirely different meaning in
Sioux City; here, a driver picks up an
order at the window of Tastee's.
(Opposite) George Margeas holds a
coney; his chili recipe spends its time
in a bank vault.
Sioux City has always been Iowa’s rebellious child, the one who refuses to eat what the others eat. While the rest of the state gobbles the national average of three franchise burgers and four orders of fries every week, Siouxlanders remain devoted to some personal fast food traditions. While the big franchisers homogenize the rest of America, the rebel town maintains a distinctive appeal.

Rebellion is born out of loyalty. Long before the McOigs of food service appeared in the Hawkeye state, Siouxland diners queued up for coney, “tavers,” “Charlie Boys,” onion chips, “tastes,” chili dogs, and pork tenderloins. Half a dozen restaurants in Sioux City have been serving pretty much the same menu for half a century. By contrast, there is one such restaurant in Des Moines, which has several times the population. Why is this? It’s part civic personality and part an accident of history.

Mayor Craig Berenstein explains the first point. “Sioux City has always had a mentality of self-sufficiency. There is a feeling that we are not recognized by the rest of the state, so we have to fend for ourselves.”

This wild and independent town was settled where Lewis and Clark buried the only casualty on their perilous journey into the unknown. Young Sioux City thrived by supplying Indian fighters and gold miners. It boomed in the late eighteenth century, going from an outpost of 7,000 to a meat-packing metropolis of 30,000 in less than 10 years.

Railroads and corn made Sioux City the envy of the prairie. Farmers conquered a savage land plagued with locusts, grasshoppers, droughts, tornadoes, blizzards, dust storms, hostile natives, and hellish grass fires. In 1887, local boosters parlayed the corn harvest into a tribute to the almighty power of grain. The town met that year to praise God for the rains that spared them from a ravaging drought. Instead of performing a rain dance, like the previous tenants of the land, they hired an architect to build a cathedral of corn.

Jean Calligan still keeps the rejection letters that McDonald’s sent her father after he repeatedly applied for a franchise in the 1960s. “They told him that Sioux City just didn’t have the profile of a McDonald’s town,” she confides, with a sly grin.

So Vincent Calligan built his own fast food store, the Taste Inn & Out, which looks pretty much like it did when he opened it 48 years ago. The restaurant sold “tastes,” a variation on the “tavers,” or loose meat sandwiches. Sioux City bars served these, by several names, throughout Prohibition, which was pretty much ignored in this independent, frontier town that called itself “Little Chicago.” Like the “Charlie Boys,” still served at the Miles Inn, “tastes” are especially sauced ground beef sandwiches that require too much labor to appeal to the fast food giants.

Taste Inn & Out’s legendary onion chips are even more labor intensive. Diamond-shaped petals are hand cut from fresh onions, hand-breaded, fried, and served with the famous, fresh-made dip that Jean Calligan’s mom, Marie, invented.

“I get some really creative phone calls asking for the recipe for the dip. People have claimed to be allergists, Burger Department officials, FDA inspectors, whatever,” Calligan says. On a good night Calligan sells 3,000 “tastes” and 150 pounds of onion chips.

W.E. Loft’s first corn palace was called the Eighth Wonder of the World and attracted 100,000 tourists, including President Grover Cleveland and railroad tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt. It also brought the Massachusetts financiers who would build the new Sioux City, with buildings of steel and marble as marvelous as Loft’s palace of corn and grain.

History often takes abrupt turns. Massachusetts money and the stockyards made Sioux City powerful in the late nineteenth century, but by the mid-twentieth century, innovations in meat packing and food service were transforming American agriculture. The first interstate highways were plotting the destinies of towns, just as the first railroads had many decades earlier. Far from the I-35 and I-80 corridors, at a time when meat packing and farming barely provided a living wage, Sioux City fell off the map of the emerging food culture.
The average fast food worker in America lasts less than four months on the job. Despite the hard work, some of Calligan’s employees have been at Taste for decades. Mary Martin has run the kitchen for 25 years and calls herself “The Onion Fairy.” Calligan believes in keeping things challenging: “I’m not mechanized because my production is unique.” She thinks employees respond to the difficult preparations, an unheard of practice in the high-tech world of franchise food. “You have to trust people, not science. Science loses flavor and around here, people eat fast food for flavor.”

Calligan’s neon sign at 2610 Gordon is original and the café is still strictly a drive-through. The biggest change in half a century was redesigning the driveaway for driver’s side pick-ups. “Back when Mom and Dad opened, cars were scarce and everyone always had a passenger.”

By the time Vincent Calligan moved here from West Bend in 1940, the Coney Island café had been thriving for two decades. George Margeas came to Sioux City from Roomui, Greece. He had opened a restaurant in Des Moines, but “didn’t like that town.” In Sioux City he worked on the railroads, waited tables, and saved $500, enough to open Coney Island with a partner.

The business was built around the family recipe for chili and even today, George’s son Nick Margeas says, it is locked in the bank vault and known by only three people. Not much has changed in 80 years, as one can see by looking at the photos of the place over the decades.

“The biggest change is the city made me take down my neon sign. Stupid ordinance. Biggest difference is I bought a vegetable chopper to cut my onions; I used to do it with a knife. The machine cost me $3,000, but it’s saved me thousands of hours of work, and selling them before even George Margeas opened his store. These days, retired immigrants from Crete gather here for coffee every morning. It’s a scene that reflects the origins of Old Milwaukee and its sympathetic involvement with Sioux City’s immigrant society. The café’s walls are covered with pictures of high school teams, all of which have been fed for free here.

Gus Demetroulis and Tom Eliades bought the business in 1956 after both men had fled Communist terror in Macedonia. Tom retired in 2000, but sons John and Mike Eliades now partner with Gus. During a typical lunch hour, they serve 1,000 hot dogs, but this is not really fast food. People hang around the comfortable, spotless restaurant. A 60-year-old “penny scale” and a 100-year-old hot dog grill draw folks. So do the upscale amenities: china, silverware, and glass. Even the pop comes in tall glass bottles that are most difficult to find, so much so that customers tend to pilfer them. A framed mustard stick treated more than 10 million hot dogs. When it broke John whistled a new one and enshrined the fallen soldier. Even the dishwashers here are legendary. People talk about Jack Wickey who worked here for 30 years, when the place was open 24 hours, and always dressed to the T’s, suit, tie, vest, polished shoes, and perfectly groomed hair.

While we visited, two different vacationing families came in. Both told us this was the first stop they make when visiting Sioux City. John said he hears that all the time and that it’s part of the reason he’s here. “I never dreamed I would end up working here, but I got tired of Chicago; it was too big and impersonal. I missed Sioux City, so I came back and worked for Gateway, but when the family asked me to come