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Missing Home Plate



By **JONATHAN REYNOLDS**
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I grew up in New York and was such a Yankee fan that in the fifth grade I insisted on being called Allie because of the great pitcher. In the sixth grade, I was so besotted that I asked the headmaster -- a gruff megalomaniac -- if I could be excused from classes to attend the opening day at the stadium. To my astonishment (and the whole sixth grade's), he said yes. Although many of the players were before my time, I knew the Yankee numbers up to 30 by heart, and still do. Twenty-two years later, I wrote my first play, "Yanks 3 Detroit 0 Top of the 7th," about a Yankee pitcher having a nervous breakdown on the mound.

I was a spoiled kid in many ways, but none more than as a Yankee fan. They just won everything. So we Yankee sons believed this was our destiny too. (Very good for self-image, very bad when it turned out they could also lose, because it meant so could we.) The few times when they did lose (say, not winning their fifth World Series in a row) became cause for tortured soul-searching: What had we done wrong? Why was God mad at us? And just as I didn't know that I was living a privileged childhood

until it was too late to do me much good, I didn't realize till too late that the Yankees weren't going to finish first forever. I was a fair-weather fan, it turns out; when they began failing -- and I began growing up -- the disillusion was so crushing that I turned on them. Sort of like kids and parents.

I don't really remember the food in the Bronx. Like Jughead in the Archie comics, I much preferred hamburgers and made alliances with people who felt the same, shunning those who liked hot dogs. I ate franks at the stadium only because the burgers were so bad. (Still are, at every ballpark -- in order to murder bacteria, they're cooked beyond defeat.) But on recent visits to five ballparks -- sometimes solo, sometimes with a demographically targeted adolescent or two -- I was stunned to discover just how sorry the food is at our local arenas.

I stand second to no man in my appreciation of Junque food as one of the great cuisines of the world. Nothing I like better than sharing a breakfast of sausage gravy and biscuits with my son Eddie at the Sparta Restaurant in North Carolina or a midnight binge of seven to eight White Castle cheeseburgers with my older son, Frank. So it's not with pleasure or from snobbism that I tell you that the food at Shea is possibly the worst food in . . . the . . . world. It's better at Yankee Stadium -- but only if you consider that boring trumps putrid.

How did we -- supposedly feeders in the culinary capital of America, snubbers of the mighty Ducasse, insist on superlatives of everything we consume -- get into such a wretched state? How is it we have allowed our prized ball clubs with their fat payrolls and staggering TV revenues to stiff us with near-toxic grub? Why hasn't there been a food riot in 73 years?

It's not like this in San Francisco. At Pacific Bell Park, the new home of the Giants overlooking the splendid bay, the menu explodes the notion of traditional ballpark food. More inclusive than the Republican Party (well, at its convention), it features Mexican, Thai, Japanese, health and vegetarian food as well as the more customary hot dogs and popcorn. Although it would be a stretch to suggest going to this beautifully designed and located park just to eat dinner, more than enough succulent tidbits can be assembled to make a delicious meal.

Chief among them are the scrumptious Gordon Biersch garlic fries, which are so inspired that during a four-run Giant rally, the line to the stand was 50 persons strong. Antithetical to the chili fry, the garlic fry sizzles with a wonderfully concocted fresh garlic-parsley-oil sauce. (I take it back: these alone are worth going to the ballpark for.) Other standouts are the Chiang Mai pork with a creamy mint sauce (though the other Oriental offerings

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are too sweet); a whopping platter of Mexican pulled chicken; thin-crust margherita pizza with fresh tomatoes; and clam chowder in a bowl made entirely of bread, an engineering feat I would never have imagined possible. A subcontractor called Ships even offers this feisty crowd not only a very acceptable sushi vegetable roll but also surprisingly delicious boiled soybeans (edamame) by the cupful. Admittedly, boiled soybeans would be a tough sell in New York, and we could teach them a thing or two about a pastrami-and-corned-beef sandwich (PacBell's is dull and expensive), but whoever is in charge of food has hit several back-to-back grand slams.

Curious to see whether the entire West Coast was ahead of the curve on ballpark food, I set out for the fad-manufacturing city to the south. I have enormous affection for L.A., where I lived for seven years, but I never did cotton to the only team in the city. Though known for their fire and color when in Brooklyn and originally called the Trolley Dodgers, the frequent invocation of the current outfit's sanctimonious aura -- "Dodger Blue" -- always seemed to me more accurately described as "Dodger Bland." And the food follows suit. The concession stands here are an uninspired collection of fast-food franchises that neither please nor outrage, just anesthetize. There's nothing you couldn't get at any Carl's Junior, Pizza Hut, Subway or TCBY elsewhere in this giant suburb of a metropolis. In short, no effort has been made to make the baseball experience any more interesting than a listless car trip through the local strip malls. Get out of town!

And head for Baltimore. Even though it may mean traveling by train from Penn Station, the crummiest train station on this coast (please, Senator Moynihan, hurry), it's only two and a half hours, and if you don't eat the Amtrak food, it's a pleasant trip. Once at Camden Yards, where the Orioles' stadium ingeniously complements the surrounding warehouses, you'll find a variety of food that almost rivals PacBell's. Inside the park, as well as along the adjoining food alley, all kinds of sausages are grilled before your eyes (not ahead of time and then stored in foil) -- including an especially delicious garlic-and-herb variation. Pit-smoked beef and turkey are carved from three smokers at Boog's Barbecue, almost juicy and deliciously spicy (not sweet) ribs and pulled-pork sandwiches are on sale at Bambino's Ribs (Boog Powell played for the O's and the Babe was born here) and old-line microbrews like Wild Goose and Brimstone supplement the standard watery Bud and Bud Lite.

All welcome you to an experience actually worth paying the inflated prices for. Here, I found not only the best hot dog on my stadium prowl from a place called Dogs Plus, but also what my 9-year-old companion called "the second best I've ever tasted" at Little Ida Fries. (He had

forgotten what the first were.) Yes, you could certainly come to Camden Yards for lunch and never watch the game.

Which unfortunately brings us back home, where you can't.

The food at Yankee Stadium is reminiscent of Dodger fare, though at least it doesn't rely on unimaginative fast-food franchises. Actually, the hot dog here is good. I found the "cheese" fries gloppy and lumpy, but the 13-year-old wolfed them down, explaining with irrefutable logic, "but I like fake cheese." The popcorn is mushy; the sausages and chicken fingers, dry; and the cotton candy turns your teeth blue. Mainly, it's all uninspired and just plain no fun.

But it's Le Bernardin compared with Shea, where, if you must eat, you better bring a mouth ambulance. With the exception of a respectable kosher hot dog, the entire menu is truly borderline inedible. The 9- and 13-year-old food tasters I took with me turned their noses up at the hamburger and chicken-breast sandwich -- probably because they intuited the former would taste like ground cardboard and the latter, to save waste, unground cardboard. The grilled nonkosher Kahn's hot dog is tough on the outside and like pudding on the inside. Sausages are swathed in dry, dead bread; the funnel cakes are chewy from sitting around; and the pretzels are so soggy they fall over when you hold them. And for some reason, both New York parks are stingy with condiments -- at Shea you can't even find salt!

Most gruesome of all is a small, sticky-floored and tacky bar named after one of the great wits and cranks of the game -- and the man not only responsible for most of the Mets' early popularity but also the one who gave them the sobriquet "Amazin'" -- the justifiably legendary Casey Stengel, out from under whose hat once flew a bird. Called Casey's, this depressing anti-homage serves a pulled-pork sandwich the smell of which can only be described as intestinal. Here, too, is a pizza rated "minus 90" by the 9-year-old, who should know -- as well as several other snacks I didn't have the nerve to touch. I guarantee you, if Mr. Doubleday (the owner, not the inventor) ever left his leathered and sequined bunker to buy anything here, he'd never do it again.

My suggestion? Train it to Baltimore or fly to San Francisco. Otherwise, find a coat with many inside pockets -- the kind Harpo Marx used to wear. Buy some Sabretts, a couple of chicken and lamb gyros from any street vendor in the city, a few slices of pizza from Two Boots and head for the bleachers, where all the interesting crazies are. And with all the money you'll save -- and the pleasure you'll get from eating really good Junque food -- you'll be happy to pay the outlandish prices for stadium beer.