

Long before White Castle came to Arizona, this Phoenix diner grilled Midwest-style sliders



An Italian beef sandwich with hot and sweet peppers at Chicago Hamburger Company, Nov. 5, 2019.

[Priscilla Totivapungprasert](#), **Arizona Republic** Published 9:23 a.m. MT Nov. 8, 2019 | Updated 5:13 p.m. MT Nov. 20, 2019

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Chicago Hamburger Company looks like a shrine to the Windy City. Inside the walls are plastered with memorabilia: Campaign signs of Chicago's mayoral candidates over the years, a cutout of Michael Jordan in a tuxedo, a massive poster of the Chicago Bears team that won the 1986 Super Bowl. Owner Bob Pappanduros, who grew up in Chicago, feels particularly proud of the transit map, which a customer's daughter nicked from a subway, drunk in the the middle of the night. Pappanduros also tapes photos on the walls, underneath the vintage Wheaties boxes, of fans wearing blue Chicago Hamburger Co. T-shirts. Two customers started the tradition in 2002 and Pappanduros now has photos taken from all seven continents — a scientist gifted him with the last continent.

The no-frills diner has sat on the southwest corner of 38th Street and Indian School Road since 1975. With Phoenix's [booming growth](#), the city has turned into a magnet for [deep-pocketed development companies](#), but Pappanduros wants to make sure there's still a place for local, family businesses like Chicago Hamburger Co. "That's what I am and that's what I grew up," Pappanduros said. "I worked in a local family joint back in Chicago and I'm a local family joint here."

'Home of the Windy City Slider'

Ask Pappanduros what a Chicago slider is and he'll be the first to tell you: It doesn't exist. One of the restaurant's original signs, "Home of the Windy City Slider," still hangs outside the building. It wasn't a slogan he came up with, but one that came with the restaurant. Pappanduros ran with it. "I mean, does a Chicago hot dog exist? Yeah. Does Chicago Italian beef? Yeah. Does Chicago deep dish? Yeah," he rattled off. "But when you say slider, there's no such thing. No such origin."



Bob Pappanduros talks to customers, Nov. 5, 2019, Michael Reed (left) and Tomas Wall (right) about living in Chicago. (Photo: Carly Bowling/The Republic)

After taking over the restaurant, he expanded the menu but kept it simple: burgers, Chicago-style hot dogs, old-fashioned milkshakes and garlic fries. He considered getting rid of the sliders, which are modeled after White Castle's signature sandwich, but nixed the idea because the restaurant was already known for them and as it turns out, they

were the most popular order. When the Cubs ended their 108-year World Series drought in 2016, [Chicago Hamburger Co. gave out free sliders](#). The restaurant held a similar promotion in 2005 when the White Sox won the World Series.

While still small, the sliders at Chicago Hamburger Co. are larger than a White Castle slider and, he added jokingly, "something you can eat when you're sober." For less than \$2, a diner at Chicago Hamburger Co. can have one slider: a grilled beef patty with onions, Düsseldorf mustard, ketchup and pickles wedged in a square-ish bun. He gets the bread from Capistrano's Bakery on South 24th Street because it's one of the only local suppliers that makes buns that size, he said. Capistrano's is one of the family-owned businesses from which he sources. Others include Shreiner's Fine Sausages and Pantano Produce Company in Phoenix.



Cheese sliders at Chicago Hamburger Company, Nov. 5, 2019. (Photo: Carly Bowling/The Republic)

A second generation restaurateur

Pappanduros has been familiar with family-owned businesses his entire life. He grew up in a big Greek family and spent much of his time in his family's restaurant, located in a blue-collar neighborhood in Chicago's south side, he said. He still knows a bit of polite Greek and can swear a decent amount, courtesy of one of his first jobs as a busboy when he was 14.

He and two of his four siblings also worked at his father John's restaurant, Peter B's, a neighborhood hot dog joint. Pappanduros thinks he picked up his dad's personality. "I mean, my dad didn't have a second personality when talking to customers," he said. "My dad was friendly and jovial and loved to socialize with people, but he was still always himself." Parts of Chicago Hamburger Co. echo his father's restaurant. Just as he and his siblings worked in the family business, Pappanduros' son also worked at Chicago Hamburger Co. for 10 years before graduating college.



Bob Pappanduros celebrated the restaurant's anniversary with a hamburger tattoo on his left arm. (Photo: Carly Bowling/The Republic)

Pappanduros still considers his restaurant a family business, except it's the Rodriguez and Martinez families now, he said. Most of his employees come from the same two families and some of them have worked with him since 1986, when Pappanduros was employed at La Camarilla in Scottsdale, he said. Over the years he's worked alongside them as line cook, cashier, busser. Similarly, the employees at Peter B's had also worked with his father for a long time, Pappanduros said.

As a nod to his roots, the street signs from the corner where his dad's restaurant once stood — Cermak Road and Paulina Street — are attached to a window frame at Chicago Hamburger Co. "It's kind of why I ended up at this joint," Pappanduros said. "I mean, I could have gone into dinner houses and done nice food for a good amount of time, but I really wanted to just go back to what I knew and what I was."

'We do the best job we can every day'

On a recent Monday, Chicago Hamburger Co. was packed for lunch and when he's not in the kitchen, Pappanduros greets customers by first name. The restaurant gets a lot of construction workers, suits and everyone in between during lunch hour, Pappanduros said. He nods at two groups of diners who just left — one from Arizona Public Service and another from Salt River Project, he recognized.



Bob Pappanduros, seen at his restaurant Nov. 5, 2019. (Photo: Carly Bowling/The Republic)

As rents in Phoenix go up, he sees less opportunities for people to open small places like his — not just restaurants, but mechanic shops and other self-started businesses. "You go up and down the street now, you won't see a lot of single-owner places," Pappanduros said. "You see a lot of investment groups, a bunch of money people. For somebody like myself, to start out with little or nothing and get a place going, there's less and less areas I think are affordable."

While his restaurant serves a scrapbook for Chicago history, it also documents people from this Phoenix neighborhood — signed pictures of past Arcadia High School basketball teams hang next to a section of Chicago Bulls pictures, for example. Ask him about Chicago sports and he'll admit he's started following more local sports teams — he's a fan of the Arizona Coyotes. He only recently stopped playing community softball

because he got tired of being the "oldest, slowest and worst person on the team," but his son still manages the Chicago Hamburger Co. team.

Being a part of the Chicago Hamburger Co. community has been a worthwhile way to spend half his life, Pappanduros said. There are families who come in for holiday reunions, to remember a loved one after a funeral and to introduce the next generation of family members. There are also people who come in for the first time after driving by 20 years, he said.

"We do the best job we can every day, and try to be a good neighbor, a friend to people, and just do things right, as far as how we treat people," Pappanduros said. "We're an everyday kind of joint, nothing fancy."



An Italian beef sandwich with hot and sweet peppers and a Chicago style hot dog with french fries at Chicago Hamburger Company, Nov. 5, 2019. (Photo: Carly Bowling/The Republic)

Chicago Hamburger Co.

Details: 3749 E. Indian School Road, Phoenix. 602-955-4137, chicagohamburger.com.

Hours: Monday to Saturday, 10:30 a.m. to 8 p.m.