

INSPIRATION FOR THOSE WHO MUNCH

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History is full of great eaters.

Dr. Ronald Alkana: 17 bananas in two minutes in 1973.

John Kenmuir: 18 hard-boiled eggs in 20 seconds in 1987.

Peter Dowdeswell: 144 prunes in 31.27 seconds in 1986.

Some people run marathons. Some swim across the English Channel. Others, like France's Michel Lotito, eat an entire Cessna aircraft. (It took him two years.)

These are my heroes.

I'm not a glutton by nature, but I'm convinced the quest to push the limits of the human body, including the stomach, is a noble one.

Fortunately, even at a time when stomachs are being stapled and carbs are being cut, there are a select few who still agree with me.
I give you Tony Groch.

Over the weekend, proud Tony from West Toledo successfully defended his pierogi-eating title at the Lagrange Street Polish Festival.

Hungry for stuffed dough and a win, he bested six competitors by cramming down eight of the ethnic snacks in two minutes.

The 203-pound, 65-year-old retiree came into the contest without training, relying merely on his natural ability.

"I'm a fast eater," he said. He described his strategy as, "Just chew fast and swallow fast."

Any stab at greatness is generally made even sweeter by overcoming adversity, and Mr. Groch's case was no different. It would have been easy for him to gulp down the traditional pierogi filled with cabbage, potatoes, and cottage cheese that he and his grandmother used to fry in butter and onions, and garlic.

But these weren't his Busha's pierogi. They were larger and filled with spicy cajun pork, a more challenging stuffing.

No matter, he still devoured the competition, outpacing a runner-up who ate six and a third place finisher who downed four. When the contest was over, Groch turned things up a notch. Or, put differently, let his belt out a notch.

"When I got done eating, I went over by the side and ate four more of them," he said. "I ate what was left because they were good."

By the end of the day, Groch may have been full, but he wasn't full of himself. He knows his limits, knows he's not ready to become a professional gurgitator and join the International Federation of Competitive Eating.

Pierogi eating is nice, but it's nothing compared to the hot dog gorging I witnessed earlier this month in New York as part of the Nathan's Famous hot dog eating competition.

Adding a whole new dimension to the term "all-you-can-eat" was Takeru "The Tsunami" Kobayashi, the long drink of water from Japan who won this year's Super Bowl of eating. The 132-pound man obliterated the competition by breaking his own world record and consuming 53 1/2 hot dogs and buns in 12 minutes.

It was a hypnotizing trip down the alimentary canal for spectators like me who made the trip to Coney Island. Perhaps most amazing was the third-place finisher, Sonya "The Black Widow" Thomas. According to announcers at the contest, at which she set an American eating record with 32 hot dogs, she weighed 100 pounds at the beginning of the eat-off and 107 pounds at its conclusion.

After the competition, I bought my own Nathan's hot dog and ate it at a leisurely pace in 1 minute and 13 seconds. Based on this conservative figure, I bet I could eat about 10 weiners in the allotted 12 minutes. Not too bad, but certainly not enough to enshrine me as one of the Four Horsemen of the Esophagus.

Groch has similar reservations. Compared to the gastronomic greatness of Kobayashi, he's content to be a casual diner. Or, as he put it a bit more colorfully, "If I ate 50 hot dogs, I'd blow up."

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