

Philly Cheesesteaks: The Inside Scoop from Dr. Phil Schatz

Philadelphia Cheesesteak Primer

While Philadelphia is known as a city for “foodies” and sports, there are few topics that evoke the passionate responses as “what is the best cheesesteak”. For those unfamiliar with or uninitiated into “cheesesteak culture”, a cheesesteak is a sandwich made from thinly sliced pieces of ribeye steak and melted cheese in a long hoagie roll. Overlooking the obvious nutritional value of cooked steak, melted cheese, and bread, there are numerous variations in the creation and serving of a cheesesteak.

What Makes up a Cheesesteak?

First, there are the rolls, which generally are either seeded (generally Sarcone’s, with sesame seeds) or unseeded (generally Amoroso’s), and there is rarely a choice within an establishment. Second, there is the choice of fried onions, which are cooked until soft and combined with the cooked steak. One orders onions by stating “with” or “without”. Finally, there is the cheese. Generally, the options include provolone cheese, American cheese, or “Cheez Whiz”, the latter of which may not even qualify as “cheese”. That said, one 1986 *New York Times* review described this curious concoction as “the *sine-qua-non* of cheesesteak connoisseurs”.

It is common practice to order a cheesesteak using the phrasing of [CHEESE] steak [ONIONS]. For example, “WIZ steak WIT” (noting that the “h” is often silent), or “PROVOLONE steak WITHOUT” (note that “PLAIN” will substitute).

Variations:

One final debate regarding the best way to cook/serve a cheesesteak is “flipped versus chopped”. Many establishments, especially the most popular and highly trafficked, have a grill visible to patrons, with a large pile of meat in various stages of preparation. These steaks usually take their final form as “chopped”, and the meat is broken down into smaller pieces before placement on the roll. Other establishments cook their cheesesteaks one-at-a-time, placing a sandwich-portion of ribeye on the grill, and breaking it into larger pieces while cooking.

Note that cheesesteaks can be served using chicken (chicken cheesesteak) and some establishments may offer vegan/vegetable “steaks”. Also, one can order a mushroom or pepper or pepperoni or pizza steak, which includes additional ingredients.

But, What is the Best Cheesesteak?

The debate regarding “what is the best cheesesteak” has raged on for decades, and you can Google “best Philly cheesesteak” to access thousands of opinions. Also, note that most establishments also serve “hoagies” as well as “roast pork” sandwiches, both of which deserve their own discussion and consideration. One strategy is to split a cheesesteak between two people and then try another location (understanding that few can consume more than two halves in one day)

For those interested in experiencing Philly cheesesteaks, here are a few options, depending on whether you are on-foot, taking an Uber/Lift, or have your own car.

On Foot:

Closest to the hotel is Campo’s (214 Market Street) which serves cheesesteaks as well as hoagies and roast pork.

A few doors down is Sonny's Famous Steaks, which also serves burgers and fries, and is open for "late night dining" until 3am on weekends.

If you are up for a stroll, South Street is only about 5-6 blocks away from the hotel, and is its own tourist destination. Here you will find Ishkabibble's (337 South Street). Note that the most famous South Street establishment, Jim's Steaks, is currently under renovation after a fire. Check their status closer to the conference.

By Uber

The most famous establishments are directly across the street from each other, both on Passyunk Avenue, and are often the places seen on movies that are shot in Philadelphia.

Pat's King of Steaks (1237 E. Passyunk Avenue) and Geno's Steaks (1219 S. 9th Street) are likely the most visited establishments in the city, and both are adorned with photos of famous individuals who have visited.

John's Roast Pork (14 E. Snyder Avenue) is widely regarded as "Best of Philly" serving both cheesesteaks and roast pork sandwiches. Note, however, that they are only open Tuesday-Saturday until 5pm.

Tony and Nick's Steaks (39 E. Oregon Avenue) are located further south and serve a variety of sandwiches, including a creative variety of chicken cutlet hoagies.

To the north, Joe's Steaks and Soda Shop (1 W. Girard Avenue) is a small establishment serving ONLY cheesesteaks, burgers, fries, sodas, and milkshakes. Google their history for an interesting back-story regarding their name.

By Car

There are numerous neighborhoods in and around Philadelphia serving exceptionally good cheesesteaks.

In Roxborough (to the NW), both Dalessandro's Steaks (600 Wendover Street) and Chubby's Steaks (5826 Henry Avenue) sit a block apart and have both held the "best of Philly" crown at one time.

In the northeast, Steve's Prince of Steaks (7200 Bustleton Avenue) is among my personal favorites, and is, indeed, the prince of "flipped" steaks.

Finally, if you are adventurous and/or planning on visiting Atlantic City, White House Subs (2301 Arctic Avenue) is right off the AC Expressway and rightfully debated as having the best steaks/hoagies/meatball sandwiches on the east coast. There is a mystique about Atlantic City bread that lends credence to these claims.