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## Spotlight: A Culinary Whirlwind of Pittsburgh

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Tell a Pittsburgher you're visiting their city, and they'll tell you to visit Primanti Brothers. The sandwich shop is a favorite of the seemingly blue-collar town, a throwback to Pittsburgh's industrial heyday, when steel mills lined the surrounding rivers, smokestacks spewed all-consuming smog, and truckers appreciated a meal they could fit in one hand.



And a **Primanti Brothers' sandwich** is most definitely a meal. There are a number of different varieties - cheese steak, pastrami, knockwurst, and fish are a few - but they all come with coleslaw and french fries. Sounds pretty standard, you say? Let me clarify. The coleslaw and fries come *inside* the sandwich. That's right, when you take a bite, you're treated to bread, meat, cheese, cabbage, and twice-fried potatoes, all at once.

That's how those 1930s truckers fit a meal in one hand. I'm sure they, along with the steel-mill workers and coal miners and everyone else who built this city, appreciated all those proteins and carbs. But these days, the steel city sandwich is more a staple of late-night clubbers than any labourer, thanks to a renaissance of sorts.



Beginning in the 1970s and early '80s, tens of thousands of Pittsburghers lost their jobs, and the city's population shrunk to 60 percent of what it was in 1950. To combat the loss, Pittsburgh began efforts to diversify and balance its economy by pumping state funds into local universities and technology research. The process was long and difficult and subject to fits and false starts.

But today Pittsburgh is an aspiration for cities hit hard by the economic. Now those abandoned steel mills are multimedia art centers, the smokestacks are showpieces, and the restaurant scene is diverse. *downturn*. *Forbes* recently ranked it America's Most Livable City in 2010.



(Legume salad and duck dish)

Part of that renaissance is the three-year-old Legume Bistro. Nestled between a laundromat and a martial arts studio on an ever-busy street, the restaurant, serving California French cuisine, is small and unassuming. Its atmosphere is laid-back and its service is friendly. In a word: Charming.

Owner and head chef Trevett Hooper incorporates as many fresh, organic, and seasonal ingredients as possible by working with local growers. The **Hakurei turnips** in Lamb Shank with Crispy Farro Polenta come from Who Cooks for You Farm in nearby New Bethlehem, PA. The **goat cheese** in the Mixed Lettuce with Bistro Vinaigrette salad comes from **Riverview Dairy**, north of the city, and the **chicken** in Chicken Cooked Under a Skillet comes from the J.L. Kennedy Meat Stand at the East Liberty Farmers' Market, only a few miles from the restaurant itself.

Chef Hooper even uses locally produced cider - from Kistaco Farm - to make his own barrel-aged vinegar, which is then used in Legume's dressings, soups, and pickles. The **pickled cherries** are sweet and slightly tart, with a quick, caustic burst that hits the back of your throat when you bite down. Featured with rabbit terrine, crostini, and a spiced-prune spread, they're transcendent.



Indeed, Pittsburgh is home to a bounty of farmers' markets, just as Western Pennsylvania is home to vast swaths of fertile soil and farmland. One of the prime locations to survey fresh and locally grown fare is the Strip District, **Pittsburgh's historic marketplace**. Though it's seen a good deal of change, its overall purpose hasn't changed - it has remained a meeting place of food sellers and food buyers for over a century. It's also the birthplace of Primanti Brothers. Those truckers that needed a one-handed meal were transporting fish, fruits, and vegetables.

On the west end of today's Strip sits the recently established Pittsburgh Public Market, a microcosm of the Strip itself, featuring all sorts of vendors with individual stalls. You can find everything from fresh produce to Indian sweets to micro-brewed beer. And at the opposite end of the Strip, on Saturdays, the **Farmers@Firehouse** market features a similar quality of organic produce, meats, and dairy products. The chèvre from Paradise Gardens and Farm is amazing - smooth, creamy, slightly sweet, and not at all tart.

The Strip District is also home to The Enrico Biscotti Company, a small bakery that specializes in, you guessed it, **biscotti**. It offers what seems like a hundred handcrafted varieties - not small or stale, but large and crumbly and flavourful. There's Anise Almond, Cranberry Pistachio, and White Chocolate Macadamia Nut, to name a few. Enrico's freshly baked **sfogliatelli** are worth a try too - they're crispy and flaky with a refreshing ricotta-and-orange-zest filling.

And behind the bakery, down a long and narrow alleyway, is Enrico Biscotti Café, where you can dine on breakfast or lunch while enjoying old-world décor and atmosphere. If you can, choose lunch over breakfast, so you can try the **pizza** from Enrico's **wood-burning brick oven**. The dough is soft and fluffy and chewy, the tomato sauce is fresh and sweet with no hint of acidity, the mozzarella is stringy and properly sparse, and the pepperoni is thickly cut and spicy. Or come for breakfast and lunch and one of the monthly bread-making classes. Do it all.



(Appetizers at Salt of the Earth; Embury cocktails)

When you're done with the farmers' markets and the freshly baked pastries, stay. Don't leave. At night, the Strip District features some of Pittsburgh's hottest nightclubs and bars. The **Farmers@Firehouse** space transforms into a parking lot for the **Firehouse Lounge** (See how that works?) and one of the coolest places in Pittsburgh to get a cocktail: **Embury**. Named after **David A. Embury**, author of *The Fine Art of Mixing Drinks*, the city's first and possibly only cocktail bar offers a pre-prohibition-style experience.

Inside, the bar is made of intricately carved wood, as are the tables, though they're barely treated. The bookcases are painted black, but the grain still shows through. And the bartender sports a black vest and tie and a pinstriped, short-brimmed fedora. You feel cooler just walking through door - and even more so when you visit the restroom. It's hidden behind one of those black bookcases, like a secret cellar where bartenders hid their booze during prohibition. Inside, the walls are covered with pages from David Embury's book - good reading while you're relieving yourself.



Despite the century-old setting, the cocktails are thoroughly modern. The Garden Party, with a bushel of mint, is refreshing but not as sour as a mojito, and the Strawberry-Habanero Sazerac is predictably sweet and spicy.

If you're looking for something more traditional, go with the Pure Sling, a slightly sweeter version of an Old Fashioned, or a Pimm's Cup done Embury-style. And if you're feeling more adventurous, there's absinthe done ritually, with an absinthe spoon, sugar cube, and slowly dripping water. It's not for the close-minded or impatient.

But if you're looking for a more modern setting - with food to match - the recently opened **Salt of the Earth** has you covered. Unlike Hooper, **Chef Kevin Sousa** is a homegrown product of Pittsburgh. He attended the city's own Pennsylvania Institute of Culinary Arts and spent the past decade in Pittsburgh's high-end dining establishments. But **Salt of the Earth** is the first restaurant Sousa can call his own. Its dining experience is on the edge of what Pittsburgh has to offer.

Salt of the Earth doesn't accept reservations. Well, it does. But if you're not hip enough to come unannounced, the maître d' sits you at a table hidden in the back, so the popular kids don't have to look at you. They sit center stage at the communal tables on stumpy, backless, surprisingly comfortable stools. Join them.

To your right will be a giant slate chalkboard with the day's menu, listing only ingredients - individual menus are for nerds. Directly ahead, you'll find the bar, from where your wine and cocktails originate. And to your left will be the completely open kitchen with its own bar, sushi house-style. You're in the middle of it all now, one of the cool kids - but still not the coolest. They sit closest to the teacher, at the kitchen bar. It's the opposite of high school.



(Sardines with Rapini, Aioli, and Olives)

The food at Salt of the Earth is just as creative as the setting. To start, there's **Beef Tartare with Miso, Aioli, and Endive**, or you can choose the **Sardines with Rapini, Aioli, and Olives**. You don't need to know the preparations to be intrigued. For your main, choose the **Sturgeon with Cauliflower, Buckwheat, and Swiss Chard**. But the **Pork Belly with Pretzel, Cabbage, and Sarsaparilla** and the **Short Ribs with Sweet Potato, Brussels Sprouts, and Wild Mushrooms** are just as good.

And make sure you order a cocktail while you're at it. Vodka with Chartreuse, Ginger, and Apple is the way to go, as is the Mezcal with Pumpkin, Clove Honey, and Carpano. Really, you can't go wrong; they're all impeccably balanced - just like Pittsburgh.

From farm-to-table to old-world pastries, to cutting-edge movements and french fry-stuffed sandwiches, **Davneet Minhas** *likes* an engineer, writer, and proponent of all things Pittsburgh - except ketchup. He doesn't like ketchup. Don't put it on his burgers or fries.

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