

BLTs

When I was about 11, my grandfather got it into his noggin to raise pigs. Already with a farm full of cows, bees, cats, dogs, wheat, milo, alfalfa and even some corn, Grandpa claimed the pigs were just a commodity, another way to bring in a small stream of cash.

I know better. He tended pigs because he loved bacon.

Whether wrapped up in wax paper for a harvest lunch break or with chips for dinner, Grandma's BLTs — with each element coming straight from the farm — brought satisfaction every time.

Grandma's summer sandwiches created a BLT connoisseur — me. I have wolfed them down from coast to coast, from middle-of-nowhere mom 'n' pop diners, seemingly abandoned truck-stops, all variations of Denny's, and even once in a high-end restaurant more geared to *foie gras* and mixed grill.

These culinary expeditions, ranging from double-deckers on white, to an avocado addition on the West Coast, have led to firm (but sometimes supple) opinions on what makes the perfect BLT. Let us address them, part by juicy part.

Bacon — The heart of the concoction, which even the most maladroit short-order cook can't mangle too badly. Like most things in life, the more you spend on Mr. Piggy, the better he tastes. If there's a legitimate meat market in your

SIMPLE YET SUCCULENT,
BACON, LETTUCE AND TOMATO
SANDWICHES (MINUS THE MAYO)

EPITOMIZE SUMMERTIME

BY MARK LUCE

area, the bacon there will be significantly thicker than the skinny store brands. Flavored bacons can be outstanding, especially applewood-smoked. Be wary of charring the stuff when frying it. Never, under any circumstances, nuke bacon for the microwave robs it of its soul.

Tomato — If you have access to heirloom tomatoes, use them on your sandwich. Sure, they're more expensive and often as strangely shaped as they are colored. For taste, though, no other type of tomato comes close. Their acidic sweet fluids complement the "B" and "L" beautifully. When cutting, slice 'em thick.

Lettuce — Romaine or red leaf lettuce only. Cut big leaves that will more than cover the bread.

Bread — Sourdough makes the best BLTs but never discount the cheaper wheat breads, which seem to do a workman-like job absorbing tomato juices whirled with bacon grease without getting too soggy.

Accoutrements — Not many folks

know that the devil himself first crafted mayonnaise. Its color, texture and ingredients have more in common with Crisco than the claims of "clouds of creamy goodness" that I sometimes hear. The plain BLT speaks to simplicity. The properly made sandwich renders any condiments unnecessary.

Hamlet never asked, "To Toast or Not to Toast?" But the spin on his famous soliloquy makes me feel like the indecisive Prince of Denmark, since for all the sandwich eating, I still don't have a preference on this final piece to the BLT puzzle. Straight toasting can make crunchy-good sandwiches on a winter's day, while no-toast seems better geared toward warmer weather. However, a variation may be the answer — butter one side of each piece of bread and pretend you're making a grilled cheese. The resulting mix between toasted and doughy mirrors the relationship between the bacon and tomato.

Remember, too, the proper order: lettuce layered on bottom, bacon packed in middle, tomatoes on top.

Enjoy your lunch.

Mark Luce lives in Kansas City, Mo., where he's found a masterful BLT at a restaurant called The Cigar Box.

GOLFDOM (ISSN 1526-4270) is published monthly (12 issues per year) by Questex Media Group, Inc., 306 W. Michigan Street, Suite 200, Duluth, MN 55802. Corporate office: 275 Grove St., Suite 2-130, Newton, MA 02466. Accounting, Advertising, Production and Circulation offices: 306 W. Michigan St., Suite 200 Duluth, MN 55802-1610. Subscription rates: One year \$39 (U.S. and possessions), \$59 (Canada and Mexico) and \$89 (all other countries). Air expedited service is available in countries outside the U.S. and Canada for an additional \$75 per year. Current issue single copies (prepaid only) \$5 (U.S. and possessions), \$7 (Canada and Mexico) and \$8 (all other countries). Back issues (if available, prepaid only) \$10 (U.S. and possessions), \$14 (Canada and Mexico) and \$16 (all other countries); add \$6.50 per order shipping and handling for both current and back issue purchases. Periodicals postage paid at Duluth MN 55806 and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to GOLFDOM, P.O. Box 5057, Brentwood, TN 37024-5057. Canadian G.S.T. Number: 840033278RT0001, Publications Mail Agreement number 40017597. Printed in the U.S.A.

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