

The Art of Competitive Eating

TIM JANUS ATE TIRAMISU AGAINST the clock. His mouth frothed with custard and spit as he leaned over the table of tiramisu cake, flanked by cameras and two referees. Both hands clawed through layers of cake and glop. As the countdown drew near, the announcer called for a “moment of silent contemplation when the eaters realize that the tiramisu cake is greater than them.” Six minutes later, Tim Janus won the eating contest by eating four pounds of mascarpone and ladyfingers.

Even now, I feel that nothing fully explains the spectacle of competitive eating. But I’ve tried. When I was 21, I won a grant from UC Berkeley and decided to spend a summer learning about the world – our world – that gave birth to competitive eating. The long summer months of 2008 now blur in my memory as a single eating contest of asparagus and pies, hot dogs and ribs, garlic and burritos. I interviewed “gurgitators,” asking them to explain why they eat crates of cabbage and vomit buckets of water to stretch their stomachs. I tried to understand what it meant and why some of us care so much. And, of course, like all young people on a quest for understanding, what I was really looking for was myself in those piles of hot dogs and deep-fried asparagus. I was trying to understand competitive eating, true, but I was also trying to understand what it means to be an adult, to belong to a culture, to be part of this world, to have a body and to feed it.

America has a proud history of eating contests. Pie eating immediately comes to mind, but the menu has been surprisingly varied since the nineteenth century. In 1887 a man described as a “Minneapolis quail-eater” ate 30 quails in 30 days, winning a \$1,000 bet—roughly \$26,000 in today’s dollars. In 1909 a 380-pound man named Frank Dotzler won by eating 275 oysters, 8-1/8 pounds of steak, 12 rolls, and 3 large pies, all washed down with 11 cups of coffee for the Manhattan Fat Men’s Club. In their heyday in the 1880s or so, Fat Men’s Clubs were elite social clubs with a strict membership requirement: all members must weigh at least 200 pounds to

qualify. Many clubs held eating contests to plump up their members before official weigh-ins. Even in the throes of the Great Depression, Americans across the country competed to eat the most plums, waffles, hamburgers, eggs, watermelons, apples, pancakes, chicken, potatoes, and corn.

Today, Major League Eating (the governing body of professional eating contests) organizes competitive eating contests for chili, gumbo, birthday cake, ribs, tamales, pasta, bratwurst, and more. World records include 3 pounds of beef tongue in 12 minutes, 182 strips of bacon in 5 minutes, or 6 pounds of cabbage in 9 minutes. But Nathan’s Famous Hot Dog Contest is the biggest and most important contest in the world of competitive eating. Nathan’s Famous has been called the Olympics of eating and the Kentucky Derby of consumption. This year, the total prize payout was \$40,000 and more than three thousand people showed up for the annual Fourth of July faceoff.

In 2008 I arrived in New York City two days before the contest. I first interviewed Crazy Legs Conti, an expert in all things oyster. The 2004 documentary *Zen and the Art of Competitive Eating* features him eating sticks of butter and waxing poetic about the souls of oysters. Crazy Legs has dreadlocks and brown-yellow eyes that spark when he talks about hot dogs and oysters and string beans. When he eats, he bobs his head to shake the food down his throat. When he eats, his legs quake. When he eats, he says he feels most alive.

We met in Bryant Park. Crazy Legs spoke in rapid-fire whispers about the magic of competitive eating. He went from the Olympics to George W. Bush and on to the cloying texture of peanut butter in half a minute. But his voice wavered as he talked about the upcoming Nathan’s match. A hero will be forged, he said, in the fight for hot dog fame. Who will triumph? Joey Chestnut, the California hero, or Takeru Kobayashi, the Japanese great? Or perhaps a dark horse will emerge from the shadows of mediocrity?

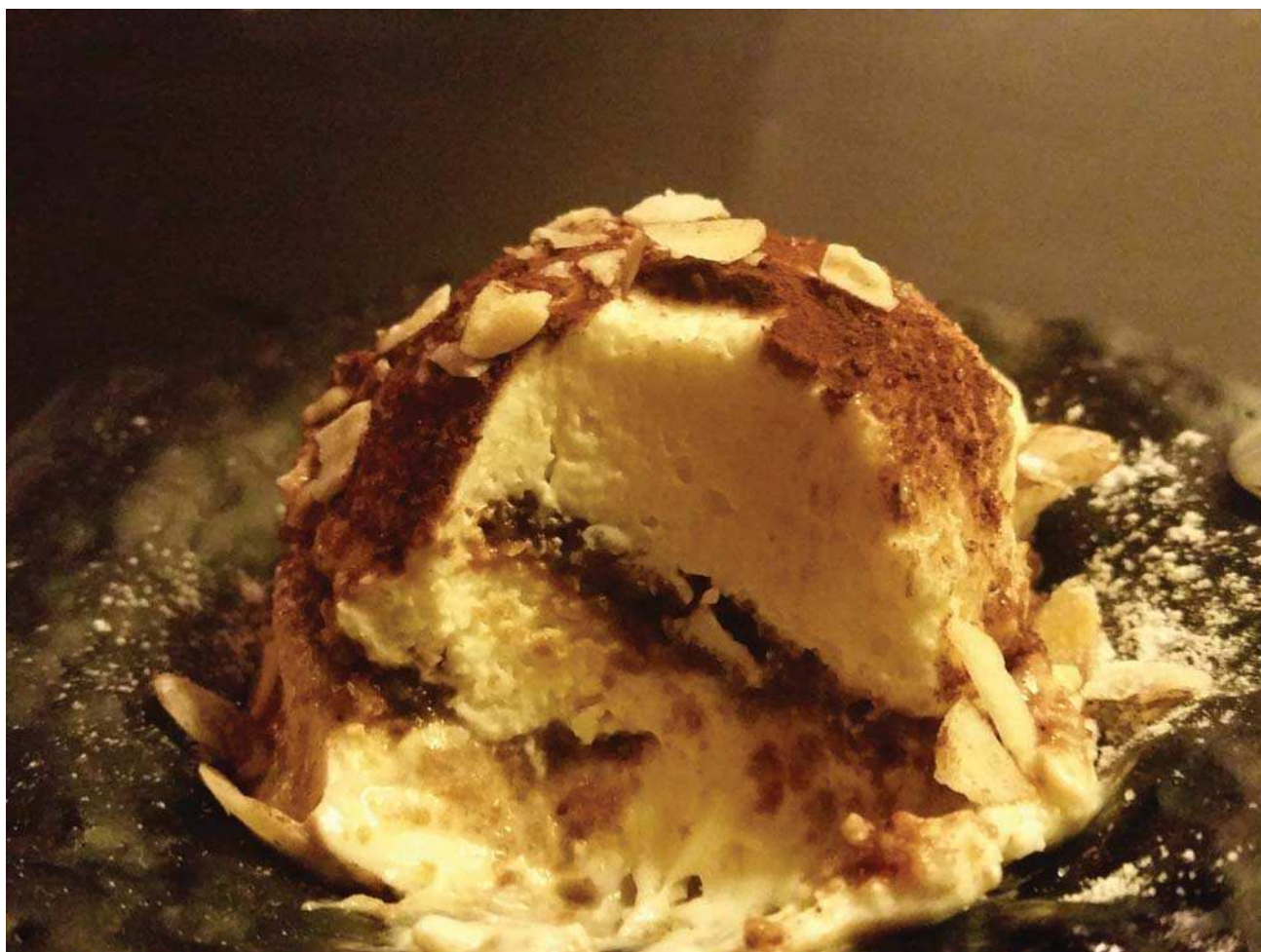


FIGURE 1: *Tim Janus ate four pounds of tiramisu in six minutes to win the 2005 tiramisu eating contest in St. Petersburg, Florida.*

IMAGE FROM PIXABAY.COM ([HTTPS://PIXABAY.COM/EN/DESSERT-TIRAMISU-FOOD-CINNAMON-1000302/](https://pixabay.com/en/DESSERT-TIRAMISU-FOOD-CINNAMON-1000302/)) IS IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN.

His voice broke when he said he was frightened. I asked him why. How could this man be afraid? He who eats 2.71 pounds of green bean in 6 minutes? He who conquers 3.5 pounds of pancakes in 12 minutes?

“Frightened?” I asked.

He was quiet and turned his face away from my tape recorder. It’s when the food inside roars out, he said. The moment when you can’t contain yourself and the boundaries of your body blur and mix the inside with the out. This moment, in competitive eating talk, is called a “reversal of fortune” and Conti said that just like many NASCAR fans watch the races for the crashes, many spectators watch eating contests for the puking. The worst, he said, was the idea of regurgitating oysters because they cut on the way down. It’s mostly blood if the oysters come back up.

Sixty years ago, M.F.K. Fisher wrote in *The Art of Eating* that “one of the most private things in the world is an egg until

it is broken.” Perhaps in the art of competitive eating, the most private things in the world are the 504 oysters in Crazy Legs’ stomach. Picture them in there: 504 bits of bloody, slippery meat. Then imagine the oysters climbing up the canal of his throat. When I think of swallowed oysters un-swallowed into a mess of blood and pearls and vomit on a hot summer stage, I think the most private thing in the world is the inside of a human body. An egg is nothing compared to a human body turned inside out.

I interviewed Pretty Boy Pete next. He called himself an “anorexic eater” because once he stopped eating, he couldn’t start. But once he started eating, he couldn’t stop. Without the contests, he didn’t know if he’d even eat at all. He remembered that he stopped eating solid food as soon as he got to college. He began bodybuilding. In the morning, he’d mix whey protein with water. At night, he drank egg whites.

The rules of competitive eating saved him, he said. It was hard to choose what to eat in everyday life. It was hard to know what to eat, when to start, and why anyone would ever want to stop. But the rules of competitive eating made it easy. The crowd's countdown signaled the start and, sixteen hotdogs later, the emcee yelled stop. The time limits, the weigh-ins, the ding of the emcee's bell, the crowd's chanted countdown; these were the rules that taught Pretty Boy how to eat again.

On July 4, Coney Island's sidewalks were packed. An electronic countdown tallied the minutes to the contest and a group of young Asian girls whispered along with the ticker: *3 hours, 29 minutes, 48 seconds. 3 hours 29 minutes, 46 seconds. . .*

Video crews aimed their cameras and microphones at an empty stage. An ESPN announcer combed his hair. Then, two hours before the contest, the warm-up entertainment began: a trampoline master did a double backflip, a man named Rich proposed to his girlfriend, an Uncle Sam impersonator sang the "Star-Spangled Banner," and finally, the eaters were introduced.

The rookies came first. Kevin Ross waltzed out in a tuxedo to the James Bond theme. A bare hot dog jutted out of his martini glass. "Shaken, not stirred," he murmured, shaking the glass over his open mouth. Water splashed onto his face as his mouth found the dog, eating it in two bites. Laughter moved through the crowd.

Pretty Boy flexed his bodybuilder muscles. Crazy Legs followed Juliet Lee, the 100-pound cranberry sauce champion. Juliet Lee's T-shirt was knotted under her chest, showing off a purple bellybutton ring. Twisting his baseball hat backwards, Tim Janus took his place next to Lee. Hall Hunt was introduced as the "first born-again Christian eater." Badlands Booker did his own entrance, rapping lyrics from his album *Hungry and Focused*. The 105-lb. Korean-American contestant Sonya "The Black Widow" Thomas looked even smaller standing between Chestnut and Pat Bertoletti, a Chicago contender who kept his hair spiked into a Mohawk. Cheerleaders in short white skirts waved their counters. The tables were heavy with hot dogs.

Then the greats squared off: Joey Chestnut shook his fist while Takeru Kobayashi showed off his new slogan "Kobayashi eats Chestnuts for breakfast." They posed side by side, hot dog in mouth, for the cameras. Kobayashi lifted his shirt to show off his six-pack. Chestnut treated us to a toothy, all-American smile. The final sixty-second countdown began.

I chanted with the crowd: *4, 3, 2, 1!* Directly above me on the stage, the white of teeth flashed out from the mush of meat and bun. The contest grew quiet. There was little to say and little to look at besides the eaters pushing food into their mouths. Competitive eating is a very private kind of drama,

the individual kind where you can imagine the pain but can't see it. Eaters can't glance up or do anything but eat and eat, face down, oblivious to the crowd or the stage or even taste. Conti explained that eating in a contest "turns your body into a human processing machine." Joey Chestnut described those moments to me as "getting into the zone," when everything else fades out and food loses its flavor and time becomes irrelevant.

Chestnut crammed the bread tight into a fist and choked down the hot dogs in two long swallows. His body didn't move much, but when I looked up into his mouth, it felt like he was speaking in some other language. Crazy Legs had told me that competitive eating "causes a visceral response" in the audience. And it felt like Chestnut was saying everything that gets lost in the translation from our bodies to the words we use to describe what it feels like to be alive. For the first time, I felt like I belonged: the crowd was sick, full, triumphant together. I imagined us all living in one body, our stomachs swelling with nitrates and salt. I felt the sweat of the cameraman next to me; the garlicky smell of hot dogs; the private drama of Joey's look of hurt and his jaws moving up and down; the hush of quiet; the heat of July on Coney Island.

The ten minutes ticked down. Regulators counted the detritus. Chestnut and Kobayashi were tied at 59 hot dogs and Major League Eating officials held an overtime round, giving both contestants a plate of 5 hot dogs and buns. The first to finish would win the contest and take home the "Mustard Yellow Championship Belt."

Eleven minutes and 64 hot dogs later, Chestnut beat Kobayashi by 7 seconds. Chestnut's toothy smile to the crowd let us see the chewed mush of hot dogs and buns. A high wave to the cameras showed off his stomach, bloated as if in pregnancy, bulged proudly. Tim Janus took third place, with 42 hot dogs. Pat Bertoletti ate 38 hot dogs for fourth place, and Sonya Thomas came in next, with 34 hot dogs.

The crowd started to leave—for frozen margaritas, for the long subway ride home, for a go on the rollercoaster—but some stayed in place, still watching the empty stage. Then we were left with little besides the image of Chestnut's mouth. It's a spectacle, we thought. It's just a lark. It's good fun. But the stragglers still straggled, watching janitors sweep a dirty stage and the Ferris wheel turn. Some took photos. One man collected hot dog wrappers.

A thin woman watched the stage. Her ribs shoved out from her chest like fingers in a glove. A fat woman stood a few feet besides the thin woman. Her ribs were buried somewhere beneath her breasts. If they ate each other, they would be two complete people. A woman and a half added to half a

woman = two women. Maybe this is how the world should be. Maybe this is how people become whole.

Until July 2015, Joey Chestnut defended his title every year at Nathan's Famous Fourth of July International Hot Dog Eating Contest. In 2009 he ate 68 hot dogs; in 2010, 54 hot dogs; 2011, 62 hot dogs; 2012, 68 hot dogs; 2013, 69 hot dogs; 2014, 61 hot dogs. In 2015 Chestnut ate 60 hot dogs. He was 31 and had been competing professionally for over a decade. Chestnut lost to a 23-year-old named Matthew Stonie by two hot dogs. Last month, Stonie came in second place with 53 hot dogs. And Chestnut set a new world record with 70 hot dogs in 10 minutes.

Seven years later, I know now that my quest came from an innocent, clunky sort of wonder. At 21, I was still puzzling out

why we do the things we do, why our world is the way it is, and where we find the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. Perhaps the process of growing up means taking these things for granted: eating and drinking and sleeping and clipping our fingernails and getting old. We all grow more accustomed to being alive the longer we've done it.

But in the moments of an eating contest, it all becomes new again. When Chestnut or Janus eat, we all become adolescents, astonished by the bodies we live in and the world in which we find ourselves. We can't help but wonder. We can't help but marvel at the aliveness of the moment: the eating, the eaters eating, and the crowd watching, silently, because there is nothing left to say and nothing much to look at but the unlikely spectacle of living things living.