

Horseshoe Sandwich History: Springfield's Culinary Horse Race

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- Dec 19, 2010
- [Michleen Collins](#)



Old Leland Hotel, Springfield, Ill. - *TLeone*

Illinois travelers seeking the origin of this Springfield restaurant icon will find the clue begins with Chef Schweska, in the kitchen, with a ham knife.

Springfield, Illinois, horseshoe fans and foodies are often chomping at the bit to try the next big horseshoe. To trace its roots (or hooves), its origin, its ingredients, its timeline and its modern permutations, a little sauce-sleuthing is in order. Locals, road food fans and history buffs need to trace the trail back in time to 1928 to understand Springfield's open-faced sandwich novelty.

The first horseshoe was assembled in the restaurant kitchen of the elegant old [Leland Hotel](#). According to Tony Leone, Springfield's designated horseshoe historian, Chef Schweska is the undisputed inventor of the original horseshoe sandwich. Leone says he has the documents to prove it.

Springfield's Horseshoe Historian Offers a Clue re: the True 'Shoe Chef

Leone owns the historic [Pasfield House Inn](#), near the Springfield, Illinois, Capitol. The Pasfield House has connections to the old Leland Hotel. The late George Pasfield, Jr., was a third generation member of Springfield's prominent Pasfield family.

George Pasfield, Jr., shepherded the rebuilding project after the old Leland Hotel burned down in 1908. In addition to owning and operating the Pasfield House Inn, Leone serves on the Illinois Historic Preservation Board. Leone says he has the records and it is well established that Chef Joe Schweska is the original creator of the horseshoe sandwich.

An Illinois Icon in the Making – How Springfield's First Horseshoe Was Built

Chef Schweska was inspired by a horseshoe-shaped slice of ham cut from the ham bone. Schweska built his "horseshoe" open-faced sandwich around that concept. Thick slices of toast and ham were the "hooves." He placed these on a hot metal steak platter, representing an anvil, topped by eggs. Then, an Old English Cheddar-based Welsh rarebit was drizzled over the open-faced sandwich. Scattered American fries encircled the 'shoe, to represent nails.

Today's horseshoes often look nothing like the original. Instead of a few fries, the fries often blanket the 'shoe. Others bury their 'shoes in sauce.

Some say their restaurant serves the original [Old Leland recipe](#), although self-appointed sauce experts aren't so sure. A few who have tasted the original insist that a secret ingredient here or there is missing. Some say a dash of A-1 sauce was added and without it, the taste isn't the same. Others say the original recipe may or may not have included a pint of beer.

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- [Where to Eat Breakfast Horseshoes: Yesterday's on Route 66](#)
- [Springfield's Best Breakfast Horseshoes: D&J Café](#)
- [Springfield's Best Breakfast Horseshoes: Charlie Parker's](#)

Common open-source sauce recipes include yellow or white Cheddar cheese or spiced cheese sauce, Worcestershire sauce,

milk, eggs, cayenne pepper, dry mustard and Paprika.

Serious 'shoe chefs often start with a roux for that *just-right* cream texture, paying close attention to other details, too, and baking from scratch. Others simply microwave ingredients from a box or jar of cheese and use fast-food style fries. Local fans know the difference.

Horseshoe Heydays in the Red Lion Room and Wayne's Red Coach Inn

Wayne's Red Coach Inn, no longer in operation, served horseshoes during the early horseshoe heydays, too. Wayne Combs worked with Chef Schweska as did Steve Tomko in the old Leland hotel's popular and elegant Red Lion Room. Combs later opened Wayne's Red Coach Inn and put horseshoes on their menu.

This furthered the popularity of the 'shoe and a competitive race, to the benefit of Springfield diners. After that, endless variations of the recipe ensued and are evolving still today.

Springfield's Leland Hotel served the popular horseshoe sandwich for years. The tradition continued even after a 1956 transition to the elegant Red Lion Room, until its 1970 closing.

Celebrity Spotlight on Springfield 'Shoe Chefs

More recently, celebrity food writer Michael Stern reviewed several 'shoe-serving Springfield restaurant's for [Roadfood.com](#). Stern reported that Kurt Ritz learned to make horseshoes from Wayne Combs. Ritz owns and operates two of Springfield's most popular 'shoe spots: [Ritz's](#) and Ritz's Lil Fryer.

Springfield routinely gets coverage from local, regional and national media curious about the ongoing 'shoe race. D'Arcy's Pint, D&J Café, [Charlie Parker's](#) and others have been featured. Local experts speak to media of secret family recipes, early-morning roux-tines, and blending perfect flavors while balancing the fine line between too thin, too thick and "just right."

Serving and timing are important, too. Thin sauce or fries not appropriately crisp can create a soggy 'shoe. Similarly, diners don't want heat lamp wilted 'shoes. Many prefer crispier hash browns to fries. Some like their sauce on the side. Horseshoe fans can be finicky.

The 'Shoe Race Hoofbeat Goes On

Springfield locals debate horseshoe trivia and most know where to eat the really good 'shoes. Many expatriates, foodies and journalists do, too. Even so, they'll argue about the sauce, the fries, the meat and other variables. Springfield even staged a [cook-off](#) at the Centennial National Horseshoe Pitching Championship in 2010. In true horseshoe tradition, the cook-off was controversial, too.

Contest officials surveyed cooking space and permitted 'shoe chefs at [Lindsay's Restaurant](#) to use their own kitchen in the nearby Abraham Lincoln Hotel. The hotel was connected to Springfield's [Convention Center](#) and contest site by a tunnel walkway. But when Lindsay's won three awards - a veritable Triple Crown - others cried foul. Two of Lindsay's winning entries (best crazy 'shoe and best breakfast 'shoe) were sidelined. However, they still won a prize for best overall 'shoe.

Any way you slice it, when talented 'shoe chefs compete, everybody wins. In contests or everyday rivalry, win, place or show, diners hungry enough to eat a 'shoe won't go away hungry.

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