

Simply delicious

Reindeer dogs are quick and easy and a delight to your taste buds

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The hotdog is deceiving. It's just a bun, a dog and some toppings. But if you've ever enjoyed a truly good one, you appreciate that it's more than an assemblage of things -- it's an art.

It's no different with reindeer dogs. A definitively Alaska concept, hotdogs made from a combination of reindeer and other meats are found around the state but rarely outside of it.

The meat normally comes from one of two suppliers: Alaskan Sausage and Seafood or Indian Valley Meats. Both make fine products, but which one you choose depends on what you're looking for.

Alaskan Sausage and Seafood's are actually a sausage, casing and all. Indian Valley Meat's hotdogs more closely resemble traditional casing-free ballpark and store-bought dogs.

The next element is the bun, which should be soft and moist and never soggy. Most street vendors heat their rolls in a steam warmer, while restaurants often toast or grill buns to order.

After the bun is warmed, the dog is sliced and grilled and the two are joined in gastronomic matrimony.

I've tasted my way through the state, and found several dogs worth writing home about.

If you're meandering through downtown Anchorage during the afternoon, stop at **M.A.'s Gourmet Dogs** in front of the federal building on Fourth Avenue.

There are several reindeer hotdog vendors in Anchorage, but M.A.'s is the only one with a line that sometimes runs 50 people deep. If you can spare \$5 and a few extra minutes to wait your turn, you'll know why.

The dogs, purchased from Alaskan Sausage and Seafood, are sliced and grilled to order. M.A.'s onions, sauteed in olive oil and cola, are the best I've ever had -- sweetly soft but never greasy.

Along with the onions, owner Michael Anderson serves up "M.F.G." mustard (a secret recipe he's developed that tastes like stone-ground mustard with slight spicy and sweet accents) and hosts "toppings Tuesdays," with an optional accent of his choosing. Past offerings include bacon, spinach artichoke spread and wasabi.

Anderson's spicy demeanor is also an attraction in itself. He moves effortlessly between caramelizing onions, turning dogs and assembling orders while engaging in conversation with customers.

"I want to be the Alaskan hotdog guy," Anderson said. "Chicagoans have their huge dogs with all the toppings, New Yorkers have their dirty water dogs, but we in Alaska have local reindeer."

For a different, yet equally Alaska experience, head south on the Seward Highway to the **Brown Bear Saloon** in Indian.

Prepared with a dog from nearby Indian Valley Meats, the bar's Alaska Dog is served on a toasted, cornmeal-dusted roll and topped with a generous heap of diced grilled onions for \$4.

The saloon is woodsy and welcoming, the walls are littered with paper dollar bills, flyers and bottle caps.

If there's no live music, there is sure to be something familiar playing on the jukebox.

The folks at the Brown Bear even serve the mouth-watering reindeer dog into the night--guaranteed from noon until 10 p.m.

"But if you really want a dog during our late-night hours," one of the bartenders told me, "you can usually talk someone into it."

It isn't the same as the vendor experience, but for those with a hankering for a reindeer dog during the winter months when street carts are closed, the saloon is definitely the way to go.

And on the warmer summer days, sometimes nothing satisfies quite like an Alaska beer with an Alaska dog among friends.

A plane or ferry ride south in Sitka is **Reindeer Redhots**, a family owned hotdog stand.

For \$4.75 you can order an Indian Valley Meats hotdog on your choice of a cracked wheat or white bun with a heap of sauerkraut and, if you dare, reindeer chili. I tried it with both, but sometimes you can have too much of a good thing.

If you're a plain Jane like me, opt for a squiggle of mustard down the middle and as much sauerkraut as you can fit.

The stand is only open during lunchtime hours on days when cruise ships are docked in town and the weather permits.

So if you're in Sitka and you see a red and yellow umbrella on the corner of Lake and Lincoln, stop by and pick up a dog. You won't regret it.

However you dress up your reindeer dog is up to you, but for the best experience, look for the vendors that know that a good reindeer hot dog is more than meat on a bun with some condiments -- it's Alaska art.

Brown Bear Saloon & Hotel

Location: Mile 103 Seward Highway

Phone: 1-907-653-7000

Hours: Food served noon to 10 p.m. daily

M.A.'s Gourmet Dogs

Location: Fourth Avenue and F Street

Hours: 10am-5pm, Monday through Saturday, March through October

Reindeer Redhots

Location: Lake Street and Lincoln Street in Sitka

Phone: 1-907-738-5559

Hours: Lunches and afternoons when a cruise ship is docked, weather permitting Website: reindeerredhots.com