



# Big League Chew

BY ROD O'CONNOR

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Major League Eating turned a Coney Island sideshow into a big-money competitive eating empire.

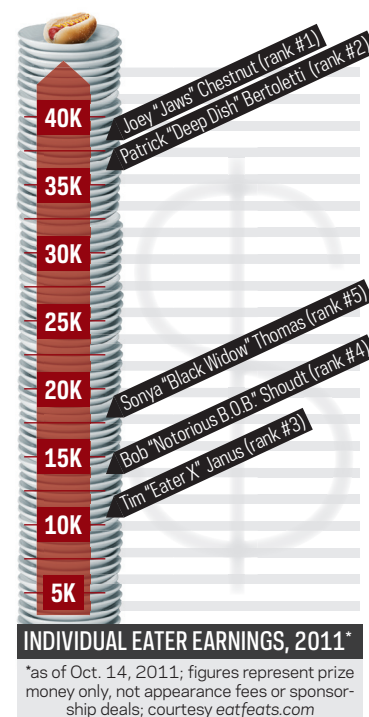


MLE co-founders Richard (left) and George Shea

Patrick "Deep Dish" Bertoletti will always regret those last two tamales. It was May 2006, and he had already set a new record by consuming more than four-dozen of the beef-filled snacks in 12 minutes. But the 21-year-old upstart eater couldn't stop himself.

A crowd of more than 200, including his parents, had gathered in a sweltering parking lot near downtown Houston to watch Major League Eating's top competitors battle it out in the Berryhill Baja Grill Tamales Eating Contest. Instead, they witnessed a pro eater's worst nightmare when Bertoletti, his dark hair spiked into a Mohawk, experienced what's known in league parlance as a "reversal of fortune."

"The rule is you can't throw up until they announce the winner. I had already won, but I couldn't keep it down," he







recalls. He vomited into a garbage can and was disqualified. The \$2,500 cash prize went to the runner-up.

**FEEDING FRENZY**  
The manic scene at Nathan's Famous Fourth of July International Hot Dog Eating Contest 2011.

**I**n inviting men and women to your restaurant to shovel food down their throats in front of an audience isn't exactly a textbook approach to marketing, but it works. As a nation, we're fascinated by the curious spectacle that is the sport of competitive eating—with viewers anxiously anticipating public regurgitation in the same way NASCAR fans root for car crashes. And there's little doubt that the sponsor of the tamale contest, a regional Texas restaurant chain, got its money's worth: Nearly every media outlet in the Houston area covered the event.

Bertoletti, now 26, has come a long way since that fateful day. The Chicago resident and catering company chef is the #2-ranked eater in the world—second only to five-time hot dog eating champ Joey "Jaws" Chestnut. He holds records in 35 categories ranging from Rocky Mountain oysters to key lime pie. He's earned more than \$200,000 in prize money. "There are times when it gets tedious and more like a job," says Bertoletti. "But I'm getting paid to eat, and I don't know who would complain about that."

The star eater's rise has mirrored that of his benefactor, Major League Eating (MLE), the 14-year-old organization that sanctions, publicizes and executes eating contests around the world. Founded by New York PR executives George and Richard Shea, the league began as an extension of the most prestigious of food competitions, the Nathan's Famous Fourth of July International Hot Dog Eating Contest. In the early days, the nascent MLE hosted a handful of events along with the flagship Coney Island eat-off. Prizes totaled \$5,000 or less.

"This year we'll do more than 70 events, and prizes and appearance fees will be north of \$500,000," says Richard Shea, who values the league in the millions. MLE is also going global, expanding like the stomachs of its professional "gurgitators" into new markets such as China and Singapore.



**LOOSEN YOUR BELTS**  
2011 Nathan's champions Sonya "Black Widow" Thomas (40 hot dogs, buns) and Joey "Jaws" Chestnut (62)



## BUSINESS

**T**oday's grand eating competitions can be traced back to the homespun pie-eating contests that have taken place at fairs and church socials since at least the 19th century. The venerable Nathan's hot dog event itself started in 1916 and remained a small-scale, regional curiosity until the early-1990s, when George Shea started to work for the PR firm that represented the sausage seller. "The contest took on a life of its own and became a very popular, unusual PR event," says Nathan's President Wayne Norbitz.

Under the stewardship of the Shea brothers, who now represent Nathan's through their own PR firm, what started as a stunt has become an American institution viewed by millions (nearly 2 million tuned in to this year's ESPN telecast). Much of the hot dog eating contest's success can be attributed to the tongue-in-cheek sensibility the Sheas brought to the pastime. They initiated official rules, a governing body and pro boxing-style weigh-ins that milked the humor while simultaneously taking the sport seriously. George Shea, who typically served as emcee, wore an old-timey straw hat and whipped crowds into a frenzy with an over-the-top delivery that fanned rivalries between eaters with nicknames like "The Shredder" and "Black Widow."

The approach was catnip for media seeking light-hearted Fourth of July news angles—and Nathan's has been riding the PR wave ever since. In the past dozen years, the company has gone from an East Coast brand to a national player. Last year, Nathan's sold more than 425 million hot dogs. "Clearly," Norbitz says, "the contest created invaluable exposure for the brand nationwide."



WINGIN' IT Top MLE talent digs in at the National Buffalo Wing Festival.

But the feat that truly put competitive eating on the map happened in 2001, when a skinny Japanese kid named Takeru Kobayashi ate an unthinkable 50 hot dogs—doubling the previous record. Soon, other sponsors wanted to emulate the Nathan's model and the idea of a national tour was born. One of the first sponsors to come aboard was Acme Oyster House, a New Orleans restaurant chain that hosted an oyster-eating contest in 2002.

Dozens more eating events followed—from conch fritters to jalapeño peppers and meatballs—with sponsors paying thousands of dollars (the Shea brothers won't release client budgets) to join the MLE circuit. And while other leagues exist—like All Pro Eating Promotions, based in Long Island, NY and the World League of Competitive Eating—the Shea brothers essentially have a monopoly: They have the credibility, the organizational structure and, most importantly, the big-time eaters. The MLE has even survived the loss of Kobayashi, who left because of the league's policy that eaters compete exclusively in MLE-sanctioned events.

But it wasn't until recently that major consumer brands started to take notice of the league's buzz potential. In 2007, Heinz signed on as the official condiment sponsor of the Nathan's contest. In 2009, Pizza Hut tapped the Sheas to help boost a calzone eating competition during the Spike TV Guys Choice Awards, which the company claims brought them \$7 million worth of media coverage. Last year, Pepto-Bismol became the sport's highest profile (and for eaters, most sorely needed) sponsor.

"We found out a lot of contestants had been using Pepto as part of their routine for years," says Elizabeth Ming of Proctor & Gamble. "So it made a lot of sense for us to help make Pepto top of mind on July Fourth, when consumers likely eat one too many of their favorite summer food."

Additionally, Pepto paid Joey Chestnut a six-figure fee, according to an MSNBC report, to endorse its product and embark on a six-city food festival tour. Ming says the brand saw double-digit sales growth after the marketing efforts. Pepto will also go down in history as helping female eaters finally bust through the

## ALL YOU CAN STOMACH

Major League Eating has a championship gurgitating event to suit every taste. Here, a smörgåsbord of upcoming events\*:

### DECEMBER

■ **Martorano's Masters Meatball Eating World Championship**—Hollywood, FL (7 miles from Ft. Lauderdale)

### JANUARY

■ **Isle Casino Racing Pompano Park World Pickle Eating Championship**—Pompano Beach, FL (15 miles from Ft. Lauderdale)

### APRIL

■ **Rouses World Crawfish Eating Championship**—New Orleans

■ **Sweet Corn Fiesta National Sweet Corn Eating Championship**—West Palm Beach, FL

### MAY

■ **La Costena "Feel the Heat" Jalapeño Eating World Championship**—San Antonio

■ **Niko Niko's World Gyro Eating Championship**—Houston

■ **Dorney Park World CheeseSteak Eating Championship**—Allentown, PA

■ **WV Three Rivers Festival World Pepperoni Roll Eating Championship**—Fairmont, WV (95 miles to Pittsburgh)

### JUNE

■ **ACME Oyster Eating World Championship**—New Orleans

### JULY

■ **Nathan's Famous Fourth of July International Hot Dog Eating Contest**—New York

■ **Taco Bell Why Pay More Soft Taco Challenge**—San Juan, PR

\*Visit [majorleagueeating.com](http://majorleagueeating.com) for more details.



sport's glass ceiling: In 2011, Nathan's awarded its first-ever pink belt for the winner of the women's division—the counterpart to the famous mustard-colored championship belt.

And it's not only brands relating to food and stomach distress that are successfully leveraging MLE partnerships. "We're always looking for ways to differentiate ourselves as a fun place," says Elissa Plastino, brand manager for Isle of Capri Casinos, a chain that holds competitive eating contests at several of its casinos: from fried catfish in Davenport, IA to pickles in Pompano, FL. "It's just crazy the way we've been able to raise our profile."

One of the biggest surprises for Isle of Capri, Plastino says, has been the built-in fan base that follows top eaters to events around the country. To attract the sport's luminaries like Chestnut and Bertoletti, the casinos offer sizeable cash prizes (they paid out \$30,000 last year). The properties roll out the red carpet for all of the contestants, she says. "We get the media and fans out, we do autograph signings. We kind of treat them like rock stars," Plastino says.

And that means a lot—especially for mid-tier gurgitators, most of whom barely make enough money to cover their travel. For after that last tamale, hot dog or fried asparagus spear is eaten, it's eaters themselves who deserve the most credit for MLE's rise and the financial success of competitive eating, says Shea.

"We live in a world where LeBron James and other big-time athletes have lost some of their appeal because they're so otherworldly," Shea says. "So the fact that these guys are real people has always been appealing. It's like, there's a regular dude who lives down the street and he's banging down 25 hot dogs. It's just kind of fantastic." ●

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