

# Greg vs. Food

The  
**FOOD**  
ISSUE

Photography by LORI DUCKWORTH



If there are two things Americans love, it's food and competition. Restaurants all over the state welcome diners who hope to conquer some culinary Everest against a ticking clock, whether it's three chicken-fried steaks consumed in an hour, a six-pound pizza, or any other death-defying delicious dare. *Oklahoma Today's* Greg Elwell visited four central Oklahoma restaurants to try to conquer their challenges himself.

By **GREG ELWELL**

**T**HERE WERE A few years between when I learned competitive eating is a thing and when I figured out that it's not the thing for me. The first time I saw the Japanese competitive-eating champion Takeru Kobayashi polishing off hot dogs in rapid succession at the Nathan's Hot Dog Eating Contest on Coney Island, I thought I might have found my calling.

But it turns out I'm a glutton for everything but punishment. Eating until I feel a little sick is not healthy—it's normal. There's a fullness, a sense of paralyzing satisfaction that comes from overindulgence, that seems to give me permission to just exist without the need to actually do anything.

Eating until I feel like I'm going to die, on the other hand, holds no appeal

*Oklahoma Today* research editor Greg Elwell pushed his limits with four Oklahoma food challenges including the Kendall's Steak Fry Challenge with three chicken-fried steaks, green beans, mashed potatoes, salad, a biscuit, and cinnamon rolls.

**“I switched to the salad, which was a welcome relief from the pile of meat staring at me out of the corner of my eye.”**



for me. So it was with great hesitation that I accepted an assignment to take on Oklahoma’s toughest food challenges. I thought maybe I could nudge my overindulgent streak into the resolve of a champion. And, if not, at least I’d get to eat some really great food.



**I** STARTED AT KENDALL’S Restaurant in Noble. The challenge: Eat three chicken-fried steaks, gravy, salad and dressing, two scoops of mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, a biscuit, and two cinnamon rolls in one hour. For those who aren’t insane or assigned to attempt food challenges by semi-sadistic editors, the menu’s normal chicken-fried steak dinner is big enough for most.

Co-owner Dee Downer shows off his restaurant the way grandparents show friends pictures of their grandkids. The walls, covered in signed photos, movie posters, and classic rock albums, are a love letter to Oklahoma’s impact on pop culture.

Yet the fact that two members of The Ventures are native Okies would’ve made a bigger impact if I hadn’t been so concerned about wiping out on the Kendall’s Chicken Fry Challenge. The butterflies in my stomach made me want to run, not walk, from the premises, but the smells wafting from the kitchen kept me firmly seated in the booth.

The medium green salad, liberally garnished with Dee’s house-made bleu cheese dressing, looked appetizing. The plate with two big scoops of mashed potatoes hidden under a ladle-full of cream gravy and a mighty big pile of green beans seemed doable, at least. The plate with two cinnamon rolls seemed ominous, if only because Kendall’s cin-

namon rolls are legendarily tasty. If these were meant to disrupt my meal, how big were these chicken-fried steaks?

Downer answered that when he grunted slightly and hoisted a platter—the kind on which one might reasonably serve a Thanksgiving turkey with all the trimmings—covered in three massive, overlapping plateaus of golden brown chicken-fried steaks drowning in gravy.

Each steak started off at about twelve ounces of beef pounded out thin so the meat is tender enough to cut with a fork. They’re dredged in seasoned flour and egg wash before slipping into a bath of bubbling hot oil.

It took about fifteen minutes to finish my first chicken-fried steak. That seemed fast, but Downer informed me that professional eater and body builder Randy Santel, who’s racked up nearly seven hundred food challenge wins across forty-nine states and thirty-one countries, ate his first chicken-fried steak in forty-eight seconds.

I switched to the salad, which was a relief from the pile of meat staring at me out of the corner of my eye. With only an hour, I figured I’d have to eat all the sides in fifteen minutes and get back to shoveling steak, but after polishing off most of the green beans, I made a critical error: a deep breath.

Breathing is usually something I consider a good idea, but when packing your innards with massive amounts of food, a deep breath is like putting a dipstick into your oil. I was suddenly painfully aware of how much room was left in my stomach, and it wasn’t nearly enough.

I tried to focus, pulling back my platter of gravy and fried happiness, all salty and peppery and warm, but after downing another third of a chicken-fried steak, I knew I was done. Downer chuckled when he returned to find me lying prostrate in the booth. Soon, he

returned with a Styrofoam container on which he’d written, “Quitter’s Box.”

I accepted his scorn, but I was also quietly celebrating the fact that I would probably not be dying that day. You have to take your victories where you can.



**N**EXT STOP: PAPA Angelo’s Pizzeria in Bethany. The challenge: Eat a six-pound pizza covered in three toppings—at least two of which must be meat—in forty-five minutes. Those with nothing to gastronomically prove but a taste for good pizza find it’s an excellent stop for a couple of lunch-hour slices.

Thoroughly bested by the chicken-fried steak challenge, I went into Papa Angelo’s Pizzeria with revised expectations. Mostly just this: Don’t die.

Papa Angelo’s serves a greasy, New York-style thin slice with a crisp, chewy crust that is all-around perfect. Addis Ochoa, a friend of the restaurant’s owners, tried and failed the Empire Challenge a year ago, but he was willing to put his stomach on the line again in solidarity.

Pizzas at Papa Angelo’s range from a petite eight-inch Little Joe all the way to a massive twenty-inch Empire pie. That wide vista of cheese, sauce, and dough is the basis of the Empire Challenge. The cooks load the pizza up on a scale and pile it with three toppings of your choosing until the whole monstrosity weighs six pounds. I opted for Italian sausage, Canadian bacon, and mushrooms. Each of the eight slices weighed three-quarters of a pound, but it seemed much heavier when I pulled up that first slice and went to work.

The lunch crowd helpfully offered their opinions of what I was doing wrong. These backseat eaters declared

**Top, the six-pound pizza at Papa Angelo’s in Bethany is made with the diner’s choice of toppings. Bottom, Greg and Addis Ochoa get ready to stuff themselves.**

# THE Challenge Continues

If you're still not full, check out these additional food challenges all over the state. Some challenges require advance notice, so it's always a good idea to call ahead.

## Big Splash Burgers

**Big Kahuna Challenge:** Eat a burger made with a loaf of Texas toast, twenty-two slices of cheese, sixteen slices of bacon, and five-and-a-half pounds of beef as well as two pounds of fries in fifty minutes. 201 South Pioneer Road in Elk City, (580) 225-2526 or [facebook.com/bigsplashburgers](https://www.facebook.com/bigsplashburgers).

## Boompa's Burgers

**I Dare You Challenge:** Eat a two-pound beef patty, lettuce, tomato, pickles, onions, and cheese on a twelve-inch bun with two pounds of fries and a twenty-ounce milkshake in forty-five minutes. 8298 US Highway 277 in Elgin, (580) 454-2442 or [facebook.com/boompasburgers](https://www.facebook.com/boompasburgers).

## Fat Guy's Burger Bar

**Fat Guy's Burger Bar Challenge:** Eat a Fat Burger—a two-pound beef patty, one pound of bacon, two four-ounce hot dogs, eight slices of American cheese, lettuce, tomato, onion, and a condiment of your choice on a one-pound hamburger bun—and a pound of French fries in one hour. 140 North Greenwood Avenue in Tulsa, (918) 794-7782; 7945 South Memorial Drive in Tulsa, (918) 893-2232; and 1009 North Elm Street in Broken Arrow, (918) 872-9313. [fatguysburgers.com](https://www.fatguysburgers.com).

## Phat Philly's

Eat eleven eight-inch Philly cheesesteak sandwiches in two hours. Every time someone completes the challenge, the number of cheesesteaks that must be eaten increases. 1305 South Peoria Avenue in Tulsa, (918) 382-7428 or [phatphillys.com](https://www.phatphillys.com).

## Lakeside Grill

**Monster Burger Challenge:** Eat four half-pound burger patties, sixteen slices of cheese, and French fries layered between two Texas Toast grilled cheese sandwiches and two baskets of fries in one hour. 1114 L A Cann Drive in Ponca City, (580) 304-7740 or on Facebook.



**“These backseat eaters declared they could eat at least half a pie, given the chance, and that my choice of toppings was all wrong.”**



**Buns, cheese, toppings, and seventeen beef patties make up the Paw Paw's Burger Challenge. At this Chickasha restaurant, eaters receive the burger and a T-shirt for free if they finish in less than thirty minutes.**

they could eat at least half a pie, given the chance, and that my choice of toppings was all wrong.

All told, I made it through two slices before the volume of food really hit me. The warning sign this time was when I started tasting the food. In an eating challenge, you don't savor each bite, delicately dissecting each flavor. By the middle of the third slice, my taste buds were isolating the fennel in the sausage, and I knew I was done.

I leaned my head back on the wall and stared at the ceiling. I forced down another bite. Then a smaller one. But that was it.

“Call it,” I told Addis.

“Same,” he said. “At least it comes with a complimentary box.”



**D**EFEATED NOW BY both chicken-fried steak and pizza, I headed next to The Miller Grill in Yukon. The challenge: With the help of a partner, eat a thirteen-pound Indian taco in forty-five minutes. And though the regularly sized Indian tacos at this suburban eatery are famous, two people easily could split one and still leave full and happy.

The taco fixings were waiting on the counter when I arrived. A pound of shredded cheese. A pound of freshly diced tomatoes. A half pound each of diced onions and shredded lettuce.

Owner Jason McCormack was behind the counter, kneading fry bread

dough and chatting with my partner for the challenge, Flying Pig BBQ food truck owner David Greggs. Unlike Ochoa in the Empire Challenge, Greggs wasn't taking on a separate individual challenge but helping in mine. That's because The Miller Grill's Indian Taco Challenge was cranked all the way up to thirteen—pounds, that is.

The full Indian taco was presented to us on a sheet pan. The massive piece of fry bread was nearly invisible under a mountain of toppings: three pounds of ground beef sizzled in spices and marginally drained of excess fat, three pounds of saucy beans, and the aforementioned salad with a cup each of salsa and sour cream. It looked like a kid's science

**Greg contemplates the thirteen-pound Indian taco at The Miller Grill in Yukon. For this challenge, customers are allowed to recruit a friend to help chow down.**



**“There are few things I love more in this world than a really great cheeseburger, and Paw Paw’s Hamburgers in Chickasha serves one of the best.”**

project gone awry, as if a child mistakenly tried to make a working volcano out of items from his parents’ shopping list.

“We should eat it from the toppings down,” Greggs said. “That way we don’t fill up on the bread.”

“I’ll come at it from the side,” I replied. “We’ll meet back in the middle.”

Oh hubris. Oh vanity. Oh thirteen pounds of Indian taco. There was no way we’d eat from the top of the mountain all the way down into its fertile, bread valley. We were full of fire to start, but soon, we were full of ground beef, beans, and lettuce. The fire was extinguished.

Midway through the meal, McCormack revealed he’d done a stint as a competitive eater in his early thirties.

“What you should be doing is training by eating heads of iceberg lettuce,” he said. “It fills you up, but with almost no calories, so you can teach your stomach to hold a lot more.”

Iceberg lettuce without bleu cheese dressing? I’d like to win, but that seems like a bridge too far.

I will say this for going at a challenge with a partner: Greggs and I drove each other on—likely far past the point when we should have stopped eating—simply because we didn’t want to let the other down. The flip side of that is when we accepted defeat, I made our photographer, Lori Duckworth, drive us back to the office, because sitting at a ninety-degree angle in a car seemed like an impossible task at that moment.



**T**HE FINAL TEST of my gastronomic mettle came in at Paw Paw’s Hamburgers Chickasha,

**Any guest wishing to tackle The Miller Grill’s Indian Taco Challenge must call 24 hours in advance, start before 6:30 p.m., and finish in an hour solo or in 45 minutes if working with a partner.**

where diners are challenged to eat a cheeseburger with one more beef patty and slice of cheese than the last person who beat the challenge.

If you’re not insane, try a cheeseburger combo with fries and a drink.

There are few things I love more in this world than a great cheeseburger, and Paw Paw’s serves one of the best. Owner Dustin Payne says it’s about his blend of beef cuts with a seventy-thirty meat-to-fat ratio, which ensures every burger comes off the griddle juicy and delicious.

Locals Billy and Heather Guinn were enjoying an early lunch when we arrived—“Best burger in town,” Billy says—but they were agog when a leaning tower of meat emerged from the kitchen held together with a long metal skewer threaded through a top bun, thirty-four alternating layers of cheese and meat, a few pickles, diced onions, lettuce, tomatoes and, finally, the bottom bun.

At thirty minutes, Paw Paw’s Burger Challenge is the fastest contest I’ve attempted, but the size of the challenge has grown, Payne says. It started with a five-patty cheeseburger, but each time it’s completed, Paw Paw’s adds another patty and another slice of cheese.

I was plenty hungry to start, and the smell of the meat wafting from the kitchen only made me more ravenous, so the first few patties went down fairly quickly. I sucked down water at a fast clip as well, both to cool down the still-searing hot beef and to clear my mouth between bites. The flavor was wonderful, though I found myself wishing for more tomato and lettuce and pickle among the bites of burger. Much like ambergris is used to make perfumes smell sweeter, the fresh salad portion of the cheeseburger adds a much-needed contrast to the richness of the meat and cheese.

The last thing I needed was more food on my plate, however, because

as I finished the fifth burger patty, I found myself struggling to take another bite. Eating close to two pounds of delightfully fatty beef and cheese was all I could take without crossing the line into full-on meat poisoning.

After going zero for four, it’s fair to say my future doesn’t lay in competitive eating, but I think I understand the mindset of people who take on food challenges a little better. There’s something Herculean about sitting down to an impossibly large meal while the faces of those around you transform into a mixture of awe and pity. And maybe the sense of accomplishment from defeating a delicious beast of a meal is enough to mitigate the inevitable stomachache that follows.

Luckily for those of us who enjoy big portions, these restaurants also serve delicious dishes in much more reasonable quantities—and there’s no shame in taking home leftovers. ■

## GET THERE

- KENDALL’S RESTAURANT**  
100 South Main Street in Noble, (405) 872-0303 or [kendallsrestaurant.com](http://kendallsrestaurant.com).
- THE MILLER GRILL**  
326 Elm Avenue in Yukon, (405) 265-2775 or [facebook.com/themillergrill](https://facebook.com/themillergrill).
- PAPA ANGELO’S PIZZERIA**  
6744 Northwest Thirty-ninth Expressway in Bethany, (405) 491-6767 or [papaangelospizza.com](http://papaangelospizza.com).
- PAW PAW’S HAMBURGERS**  
1028 South Fourth Street in Chickasha, (405) 224-1695 or [facebook.com/pawpaws.hamburgers](https://facebook.com/pawpaws.hamburgers).  
151 East Main Street in Tuttle, (405) 689-6080 or [facebook.com/pawpawstuttle](https://facebook.com/pawpawstuttle).