

# EAT AT THE PRO'S

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
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SOMETHING SMELLS GOOD—  
AND BELIEVE IT OR NOT,  
IT'S COMING FROM AN  
ATHLETE'S KITCHEN  
NEAR YOU.



## IF YOU ASKED JACK DEMPSEY ABOUT WHAT IT TOOK FOR ATHLETES TO MAKE IT IN THE RESTAURANT BIZ BACK WHEN HE OWNED ONE OF THE SWANKIEST JOINTS IN MANHATTAN, HE PROBABLY WOULD HAVE

shrugged. Dempsey's place on Broadway was known for steaks as bloody as his KOs. But mostly fans loved it because the great fighter himself was the No. 1 customer, always around and available to scribble an autograph. And that's probably about as much high-concept thinking as he gave to running his chophouse, pallie.

These days, epicurean jocks have upped the ante, moving beyond Dempsey's simple formula to bravely venture into every aspect of the culinary world. Their ranks include owners like Tony Hawk, whose chic bistro, Market, in the ritzy San Diego suburb of Del Mar, is a magnet for locals looking for some of

the city's best shrimp tempura; chefs like Amos Zereoue (page 53), who traded in football cleats for an apron at his West African restaurant in New York; and figureheads like Albert Pujols, who puts his handle on and his hardware in Pujols 5 in St. Louis. "He doesn't tell us about cooking, and we don't tell him about batting," says co-owner David Hanon.

Not far from where Dempsey once greeted his guests, Michael Jordan's The Steak House charges \$78 for a slab of meat as big as his size 13 kicks. Meanwhile, MJ's fellow baller and kitchen devotee Charles Oakley has Red, an elegant South Beach hot spot. And in tiny Olive Branch, Miss., John Daly's

Restaurant and Bar serves up grilled ahi tuna brushed with a soy ginger glaze. (And you thought Long John dined only at Hooters.)

So what's with all the jock-restaurateurs? By our tally, some 200 athletes are in the business. And that's not even counting the dozens more who have franchised everything from wings to coffee. Many of the players are in the second act of their lives, but just as many are moonlighting in their prime, and their reasons for choosing this smoky path are as varied as their menus.

With the right chef, the right look and the right mood, a restaurant can turn out to be a shrewd investment. The industry did \$558 billion in revenues last year, according to the National Restaurant Association. Compare that to the NFL: The country's most profitable sports league generated a paltry \$6.5 billion. Some jocks go gourmand to satisfy their inner foodie, while others see restaurants as an excuse to build shrines to themselves. (Those moldy jerseys have to hang somewhere.) Still others are happy just to have a place where they will be taken care of. "I don't have to wait for a table anymore," quips Hawk, who partnered with renowned chef Carl Schroeder to design their California-Asian fusion menu. "Plus, I get approached in my own place less than anywhere else. Our customers come for Carl as much as for me."

Be it steak house or diner, seafood or ribs, each venture has one thing in common: Everyone involved recognizes the value of being associated with a jock.

**TODAY'S ATHLETE-RESTAURATEURS** owe a debt to James "Gentleman Jim" Corbett, the heavyweight champ who was the first sports star to successfully play the food-services game. Around the turn of the last century, he opened a New York City cafe, then filled the place—and his pockets—after his impromptu brawl there with Chicago Orphans pitcher Frank Chance became the talk of the town. Gentleman Jim learned a cardinal rule of business firsthand: Get buzz, any way you can.

After Corbett came Dempsey, who kept his Times Square place up and running from 1935 until 1974 (just long enough for it to make a cameo in *The Godfather*). And the rest of the roster of early athlete-owned eateries is Hall of Fame quality, too. Stan Musial opened the übersuccessful St. Louis steak house Stan & Biggie's in 1949 with local legend Julius "Biggie" Garagnani. Sugar Ray Robinson had one of the most glamorous nightspots in Harlem in the '50s, Sugar Ray's. Johnny Unitas served old-fashioned steak and seafood dishes in Baltimore at the Golden Arm from 1968 to 1988.

Check out a local Zagat's guide and you'll find athletes still believe there's profit in protein. John Elway, Mike Ditka, Don Shula and Brett Favre all have eponymous chophouses, and they know fans will pay top dollar not just to eat like superstars,

but to catch a glimmer of that world. Where else can you peep one of Pujols' Silver Slugger bats or check out the cleats Elway wore in the '98 Super Bowl? And because these restaurants offer the allure of being on the right side of the velvet ropes, athletes often put themselves on display along with their merch—at least some of the time.

Pujols heads 20 minutes west of Busch Stadium to eat at his Maryland Heights place when he's not on the road. Junior Seau hosts charity events at his self-named downtown San Diego landmark, where the dining room is decorated with a

sports bar I'd feel good in," says the Golden State guard. He's proud of decisions he's made to class up the place, particularly putting Kobe beef in the burgers. Why not offer the best? "At my place," Crawford says, "fans are family."

**NOT THAT EVERY** star athlete will treat you as well as your mom or display the skills of a maître d'. Some All-Stars who give their all before millions of fans aren't interested in giving the same effort for random tables of two. Dwyane Wade needed only a few months to decide he had better places

the gourmet game. Pete Rose, Clyde Drexler, Brett Hull and Jermaine O'Neal all quickly ended their stints in the restaurant biz. Roger Clemens thought he had a sure thing when he announced a chain of Rocket Sports Grills in Houston, in 2005. Next thing he knew, he was buried in steroids headlines and watching his sideline get buried too. Marketing disasters aside, it's a wonder any sports hero wants to try his hand at hospitality, what with the potential for bad reviews, floods in the kitchen, missed shipments and those pesky customers. "It's a tough business," says Yankee sandman Mariano Rivera, who swears by the pork osso buco at Mo's New York Grill, a lush dining room located just a few miles north of Yankee Stadium. "You have to be around every day or the business won't grow."

His fellow hurler, Brewers starter Jeff Suppan (page 54), agrees. "If you're doing it just to sit at the bar for an hour, it's probably not a good idea," says Suppan, who is known to spend 40-hour weeks in the off-season at Soup's Sports Grill in Woodland Hills, Calif. "Call me weird, but I just love working at the restaurant. It's like a second home to me."

The trick to success, whether Dempsey knew it or not, is making others feel as if it's theirs, too. ☻

With special reporting by Reed Tucker and Amanda Angel.

"AT MY RESTAURANT," SAYS JAMAL CRAWFORD, "FANS ARE FAMILY."

30-foot-high mural of the scowling linebacker looking as if he were ready to dismember anyone asking for more bread. And Jamal Crawford happily watches big games at Sport, a Seattle bar and grill he opened with three jock partners, among others, in 2005. "I wanted to have a

place better than the Fort Lauderdale and Boca Raton sports grills that bore his name. But after they were shuttered in 2008, his partners sued him for not fulfilling his promotional obligations. (Wade declined comment through a spokesperson.)

Fact is, not every sports star has gotten rich in



# HOT-STOVE LEAGUE

**In different ways, these three jocks have cooked up a tasty gig away from the field.**

THE BUSINESS PLAN

**TUSCANY** Mark Eaton

**MARK EATON GOT** into the restaurant business for one main reason: profit. And because vanity joints come and go, Tuscany—his Italian eatery on the outskirts of Salt Lake City—was built for the customers. “They might come once because it’s your name,” says the former Jazz big man, “but if they’re not taken care of, they won’t come back.”

Eaton makes it a point to give his diners a little quality time. One night a week he patrols the sumptuous kitsch of the faux hunting lodge, beneath the timber rafters and past the stone hearths, fake grape vines and distressed murals. There are tables upstairs and a cozy bar near the entrance, atop which sit two eight-inch figures of the 7’4” proprietor, the only bits of sports memorabilia in the place. “People like to feel they know me,” says Eaton, who will happily pose for photos and sign autographs.

It was Eaton’s demeanor and popularity as one of Utah’s best-liked ballers that a Park City architect and a pair of restaurateurs were banking on when they floated the idea of Tuscany, in 1992. Eaton’s original job was simply to generate exposure, and sure enough, when the restaurant opened, in March 1996—coincidentally, the same month the Jazz retired their longtime center’s No. 53—there was immediately a six-week waiting list.

Over time, though, his responsibilities have evolved, especially once his partners sold out to a new investor with no restaurant background.



So, these days, Eaton is the vet who meets with the managers each week to discuss business. But he still takes a particular interest in the customer experience. “Typically, a restaurant is someone else’s idea and your money,” says Eaton. “But although I’ve never been the majority partner, this is perceived as mine. It reflects on me.”

The crowded tables say it reflects well.

—Chad Nielsen

**“[It] may finally signal Salt Lake’s entry into the realm of big league dining.”**

—DEBORAH LEWIS, *The Salt Lake Tribune*, April 1996

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PHOTOGRAPH BY ED McCULLOCH



THE PASSION PROJECT

**ZEREOUE** Amos Zereoue

**FROM THE KENYAN** folk art on the walls to the steel drum music piped into the dining room, there’s no mistaking the vibe the midtown Manhattan bistro Zereoue is going for. Owner Amos Zereoue will chat good-naturedly about his seven years as an NFL running back, but his restaurant displays only three photos of his playing days with the Steelers, Raiders and Patriots—and they’re downstairs by the can. The message: Please pay attention to the menu instead. “These are the foods I grew up with,” says the native of Côte d’Ivoire in Western Africa.

The appetizer list sets the tone—calamari cooked

in a spicy red pepper sauce, escargot sautéed in African rum and thyme, goat cheese and red beet salad, all of it inspired by Mother Zereoue’s home cooking. Among the array of traditional entrées, the standout is kedjenou, a garlicky chicken stew made in a slow cooker and served atop attiéke, a West African grain similar to couscous. If the restaurant veers from authenticity, it’s with the sweet stuff. Explaining the crème brûlée and cheesecake on the menu, Zereoue says, “We’re not into dessert in West Africa.”

The ex-footballer doesn’t just lend his name to the operation. Since opening the eatery in 2006—after retiring with 2,137 rushing yards—he has cooked, ordered supplies and checked the books. Even his vacations are working ones. He’s planning a trip to East and North Africa next year to unearth new offerings. Zereoue’s place does a brisk business, but he expects even more traffic soon. He figures President Obama’s recent trip to Ghana will spark additional interest in things African. “It feels like people want to open their minds to new cultures,” he says. “I’m excited to be a part of that.”

—Shaun Assael

**“He’s piling up hospitality yardage with a fusion menu of West African and French cuisine.”**

—BOB LAPE, *Crain’s*, October 2008

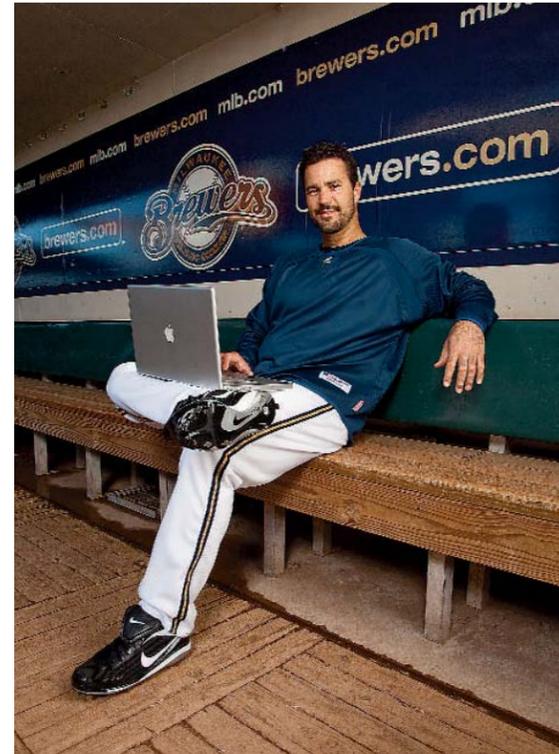
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To hear Amos Zereoue and Jeff Suppan dish on life in the restaurant biz, go to **ESPN.com** and search “restaurant video.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTIN BORUCKI | 53

THE  
SIDE  
VENTURE

**SOUP'S SPORTS GRILL**  
*Jeff Suppan*



**BACK WHEN BREWERS** hurler Jeff Suppan was starting out with the Red Sox, team coaches preached the importance of a Plan B. "Plan A was life in baseball," Suppan says. "Plan B was life after." That advice had the aptly nicknamed Soup harking back to his high school days, when he dreamt about one day running his own restaurant, as he washed dishes in places where his dad was chef.

His Plan B finally began to take shape in 2003, after he and wife Dana took over the Old Factory Grill, a restaurant Jeff's dad Larry and brother Dan owned in California's San Fernando Valley. The couple renamed it Soup's Grill and ran it successfully for a year before deciding to relocate down the road, reopening as Soup's Sports Grill, a family-focused joint. The shrewd Dana wanted to call it Jeff Suppan's Sports Grill or Grill 37 (his uni number), but hubby wasn't

interested in trading on his fame. Either might have saved them from having to sort out the occasional confusion of chicken-noodle-seeking walk-ins.

These days, the Suppans spend nearly every day of the off-season at the eatery, greeting customers and learning the business. During the season, Jeff calculates receipts from the clubhouse and is in regular phone and e-mail contact with the staff. He also responds directly to customer feedback and logs in to a feed of the restaurant's security cameras from his laptop to check the crowds on Wing Night Wednesday.

"You need to be a part of it," he says. "It's not just showing up and hanging out." In time, the Suppans plan to add rooftop seating and open a second place. For now, though, Soup's is all the veteran starter needs to build Plan B into Plan A.

-Alyssa Roenigk



**"A casual café with a friendly attitude and satisfying, familiar food."**

-LARRY LIPSON, *LA Daily News*, November 2007

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COURTESY SOUP'S SPORTS GRILL

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROSS DETTMAN

# FINEST DINING

**In the sports world, a jock has to put up big numbers to make a Hall of Fame. In the food world, he just has to make a decent pizza. With that said, here are the best places to ...**



#### TAKE A HISTORY LESSON **Mickey Mantle's, New York City**

Since its opening in 1988, food has never been the draw at Mickey Mantle's. Tasty grub would just distract patrons from looking at the walls, where unis of the Mick, Babe and Joltin' Joe hang next to autographed

#### DO BBQ **Andy Nelson's Barbecue, Cockeysville, Md.**

Andy Nelson, a star safety for the Colts in the 1950s and '60s, is better known in Baltimore for his pulled-pork sandwich than for his NFL championships. Nelson's, a perennial favorite for best area barbecue, slow-cooks its falling-off-the-bone meat just as Andy's dad, Guy, once did at Hoggly Woggly, in Alabama.

stuff of every flavor. Basically, the tavern doubles as a New York sports Hall of Fame. Forget dessert—save room for the shopping at Gotta Have It! Collectibles inside.

#### SATE A PREGAME HUNGER **Cheli's Chili, Detroit**

When the Red Wings won the Cup in 2008, the afterparty was at Chris Chelios' place. The pushing-50 vet may be elsewhere next season, but his sports bar will remain a go-to spot for puckheads, who needn't worry about missing the opening faceoff; a shuttle

#### TELL US WHAT YOU REALLY THINK

**The Mag and our colleagues at the food-critiquing website Urbanspoon gave fans the chance to dish on some high-profile pro establishments.**

#### JEROME BETTIS' GRILLE 36

"The atmosphere is cool, but the food on the bus is not that good, not that good, not that good." -Sarah

#### DAN MARINO'S

"The food is good, but I wish the service we had at the Coral Gables location had been as fast as Marino's release." -sdobson37

#### EDDIE GEORGE'S GRILLE 27

"Besides watching Ohio State fans sob over innumerable heartbreaking losses, there's very little downside here." -Jordan

#### MIKE DITKA'S

"Nothing is better than meeting Ditka after a lovely steak in Chi-Town." -ReidDurost

#### WAYNE GRETZKY'S

"Burger buns come branded with '99.' Very cool." -GretzFan

How good is the jock joint near you? Check out The Mag's master list at [urbanspoon.com/espn-eat-at-the-pros](http://urbanspoon.com/espn-eat-at-the-pros).



#### RUB SOME FAMOUS ELBOWS

#### **Harry Caray's Italian Steakhouse, Chicago**

Its namesake may no longer be greeting customers, but jocks, pols and famous fans haven't stopped dropping by to honor the Cubs' longtime announcer (or maybe it's to rip into the chicken Vesuvio and some of the best dry-aged cuts in the city). Before they were the First Couple, the Obamas took a photo with Caray's bronze bust.

runs to the Joe before games. Just steps from Comerica Park, it's a nice stop for baseball fans, too.

#### GET A SLICE NORTH OF THE BORDER **La Pizzeria Etc., Montreal**

Not content with the pizza options in his native burg, Devils goalie Martin Brodeur partnered with ex-teammate and then-Canadian Sheldon Souray to open La Pizzeria during the 2004-05 lockout. The parlor serves thin-crust pies with panini, salads and, of course, the local fries-and-cheese mashup, *poutine*.

#### KICK BACK WITH THE BIG GUY **Arnold Palmer's Restaurant, La Quinta, Calif.**

Diners don't need to wonder if the golfing great really enjoys the dishes listed in the Arnie's Favorites section of the menu. They can satisfy their curiosity by asking him. When he's not back in his hometown of Latrobe, Pa., the links legend likes to eat at this establishment, conveniently located across the street from his West Coast home away from home.

#### PROTECT YOUR NEST EGG **Sport, Seattle**

Celebrity chef and self-described sports nut John Howie carefully crafted a sports bar for the gourmand and got four local heroes to buy in (Jamal Crawford, Nate McMillan, Todd MacCulloch and Jeff Nelson). Despite upscale offerings (Kobe beef burgers, aged sirloins), prices stay low (\$14 and \$20, respectively). Little League

discounts, 22-ounce beers, weekly specials and a \$1 parking deal fit a be-kind-to-the-wallet ethos that keeps the space packed, economic downturn or no. Almost makes Seattle forget about remembering the Sonics.

#### SEE THE GAME WITHOUT A TICKET **Joe Senser's, Bloomington, Minn.**

They don't call it a sports theater for nothing. Consistently ranked among the best sports bars in the country, the four Senser's locations, owned by the former Vikes tight end, boast a ring of 5' x 9' flat-screens that stream sports from 11 a.m. into the wee hours.

#### IMPRESS YOUR DATE **Tresca, Boston**

Mix rink greatness, French-Canadian roots and an eye for the intimate, and you get ... Ray Bourque's Tresca. The ritzy Italian joint with a \$65 tasting menu and award-winning wine

list offers romantic views of Beantown's North End. It was named one of the city's top newcomers in 2006—as if the Hall of Fame blueliner needed another accolade.



#### EAT STEAK. PERIOD. **Michael Jordan's The Steak House NYC, New York City**

One bite of the strip steak in the city known for the cut will tell you why MJ's has earned a pair of stars in *The New York Times* in 1998 and raves ever since. One look at the swirl of humanity in Grand Central Station below will tell you why you live somewhere else.

#### Insider

#### OPEN TABLES

**WANT TO EAT A BURGER BENEATH A JOCK'S JERSEY? HEAD TO FORT LAUDERDALE. NO TOWN IN THE U.S. HAS MORE ATHLETE-RUN RESTAURANTS.**

FIND OUT WHICH ATHLETE HAUNTS ARE IN YOUR HOOD ON INSIDER. GO TO [ESPN.COM](http://ESPN.COM) AND SEARCH "RESTAURANT MAP." IT'S FREE FOR MAG SUBSCRIBERS. SIGN UP NOW AT [ESPN.COM/INSIDER](http://ESPN.COM/INSIDER).

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