

# Fair Flavor

Old-fashioned county and state fair treats are finding new life as different dishes

By Erin Brereton

Although many visitors to the State Fair of Texas crave traditional fair foods like candy apples and corn on the cob, some patrons, according to spokeswoman Karissa Condoianis, come to the 24-day event specifically to taste its innovative takes on the classics. Those have included coconut crab sliders, deep fried pico de Gallo, bacon brittle, and corn dog ale.

**“We have cotton candy, hamburgers—all the standard fare you’d get at a fair,” Karissa says. “When our concessions team is looking for something new, it has to be something unique that’s above and beyond what we [already] have.”**

**Texas isn’t the only state serving up atypical fair grub. To meet visitors’ appetite for inventive eats, in recent years, state and county fairs across the country have introduced variations on classic staples. Here, fair food experts share some of the tastiest—and craziest.**



Arroz con Leche (Sweet Crispy Rice) created by the Garza Family.  
Image by Kevin Brown, courtesy of the State Fair of Texas.



*A visitor to the State Fair of Texas enjoys a corn dog. Image by Kevin Brown, courtesy of the State Fair of Texas.*

## Creative Corn Dogs and Hot Dogs

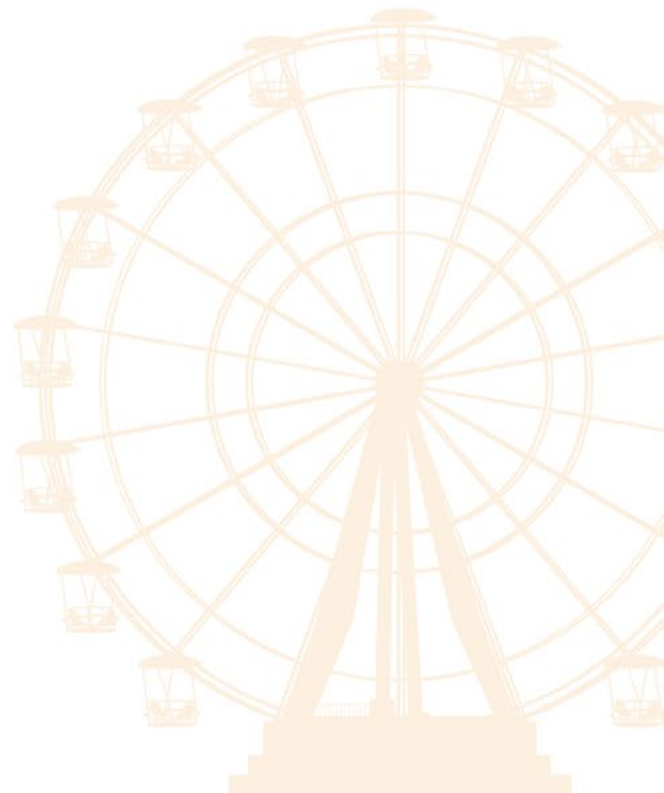
Made using a proprietary batter, **Fletcher's Original State Fair Corny Dogs** have been sold at the State Fair of Texas since 1942. These corn dogs are the fair's most iconic item, Karissa says. In 2017, the year the treat turned 75, fair patrons purchased 650,000 of them.

"It's something people look forward to year-round," Karissa says. "They'll hand-dip and fry it right in front of you, the way they've done it historically; there's just something nostalgic about it that makes people fall in love with them."

Along with the original version, Fletcher's now offers jalapeno cheese, turkey, and other Corny Dogs.

Vendors at other state and county fairs, including several in Ohio, have also tested out new ways to serve hot dogs.

**"There are some twists, where they take a pickle, hollow it out, put a hot dog [wiener] inside of it and deep fry the whole thing like a corn dog," says Howard Call, executive director of the Ohio Fair Managers Association. Howard, who has 50 years of experience in the fair and food industries, also oversees concessions at the Great Geauga County Fair in Burton, Ohio. "[The deep-fried creation] popped up in southern Ohio, as well as other states, in the last couple of years, and is starting to grow legs."**







## Unusual Proteins

Along with hot dogs, burgers, turkey legs, and fried chicken in seemingly every form imaginable, vendors are getting creative with unexpected meats. For example, at the Iowa State fair in Des Moines, visitors can eat duck bacon wontons and deep-fried chicken livers and gizzards.

The Washington State Fair also offers unique proteins: “We started selling BBQ crickets and other bugs a few years ago, along with **alligator burgers** and kangaroo sausage. That all sold very well,” says Stacy Van Horne, public relations manager for the event, which takes place in Puyallup every summer. “At our fair, people want nostalgic food or unique food.”



*The cotton candy taco created by Justin & Rudy Martinez won a 2018 Big Tex Choice Award. Image courtesy of the State Fair of Texas.*

## Imaginative Uses for Cotton Candy

Once a simple treat served solely on a cone or in a bag, cotton candy has made its way onto menus at upscale restaurants around the country, being blended with items like cake and foie gras. But that doesn't mean the sweet treat doesn't still have a strong presence at state and county fairs.

The light-as-air confection was a key ingredient in the dish named most creative food item in the **2018 Big Tex Choice Awards**, the State Fair of Texas' annual concessionaire competition. The winning dessert taco consisted of cane sugar cotton candy stuffed in a crunchy taco shell made from graham cracker waffle cone batter and topped with a marshmallow glaze and cookie crumbles.

**“Cotton candy is huge out here; it has been at the State Fair of Texas as long as anyone can remember,” Karissa says. “[The taco] was something that was so fun and embodied that the State Fair of Texas is a place for people to come have a great time.”**

## Not Your Average Funnel Cake

Across the country, a number of fair vendors have added ice cream or jam toppings to fried funnel cake, according to Howard.

One vendor at the State Fair of Texas used funnel cakes as the bun for a 2017 Big Tex Choice Award-winning burger that also featured bacon and melted cheese.

Innovative vendors take a lot of pride in generating the ideas behind these creations, Karissa says.

**“It’s about taking items that are iconic to state fairs around the country and putting them together in a unique way—in that case, repurposing funnel cakes,” she says. “You see the powdered sugar on top and the burger, and at first think, ‘That just sounds bizarre’—but it’s amazing.”**

## Good-For-You Grub

Fair food has traditionally been classified as indulgent. But with more people trying to eat healthier, vendors have introduced items that are prepared with less oil, include fresh produce, or that feature protein-rich or other nutritional components.

For instance, at the Minnesota State Fair, the Produce Exchange sells fresh fruit and vegetable snacks. At the Iowa State Fair, the Salad Bowl sells salad on a stick—an iceberg lettuce wedge with carrots and tomatoes served kabob-style with dressing. And many fairs tout various forms of grilled meats and vegetables on skewers as healthy options.

At the Washington State Fair, some vendors offer options that are low-fat, gluten-free, or vegetarian, such as vegan paella (a Spanish rice dish that’s gluten-free), vegetarian crepes, taco salad, and hummus.

**“Fair food, historically, was known as all fried food, or foods that aren’t necessarily [good] for you,” Stacy says. “But now we’re seeing a mix of people who want a cheat day [and] also people looking for healthier fare.”**



**Do you have a favorite innovative fair food? We want to know about it! Send us a picture and a short description, including the vendor’s name, for a chance to be featured in an upcoming issue of *Out Here*. Email us at [outhere@tractorsupply.com](mailto:outhere@tractorsupply.com).**

### About the Writer

Articles about travel, business, and other topics by freelance writer Erin Brereton have been published in more than 75 magazines, newspapers and other publications.