

A Cook's Tour of Pittsburgh Food Sources

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1 Introduction

I am writing this document for anyone who is moving to Pittsburgh. I like to say “I lead a food centered life”. Obtaining fresh ingredients is one of my enjoyable tasks. Unless under duress, I don't buy prepared food (there are a few exceptions: is sausage a prepared food?). And, for the most part, I am not willing to cross a bridge. Sorry, but that's just the way it is — now you know my biases.

I've organized this guide by ingredient starting from raw and going towards the manipulated. I've left out coffee and tea places in part because everyone has their own opinion and in part because (a) I don't drink coffee and (b) I've been mail ordering my tea for decades. I've included supermarkets but only because I have to.

This is not updated to account for Covid...

2 Fruit and Veg

Beside the supermarkets, I mainly use the city's farmers markets. They open around Mother's Day and close right before Thanksgiving. Since I cook and eat seasonally, I'll buy what's fresh and in season. My favorite market is the one in Squirrel Hill on Sunday morning. If I miss it, there is another one Monday afternoon in East Liberty. During the winter, there is a Saturday market in Bloomfield.

The strip has a few fruit and veg places but their quality is often questionable. They are often cheaper than the supermarket but you get what you pay for. Look out for mold!

3 Meats

I'm not sure why, but both locally sourced butcher shops closed. This is an enormous loss, but the best butcher appears to be *Tom Friday's Market* located on the Northside. If you want lamb, you should pre-order. But the beef is first class. They also have Slovenian sausage.

Henry Grasso's is an old time Italian butcher still located in Larimer. Their specialty is sausage... I regret I still haven't done the taste test against Parma.

The *Farmer's Market Coop* in East Liberty is only open on Saturday morning. It may well be the last butcher (J.L. Kennedy) in the city, but again, I haven't been.

In the strip, *Strip District Meats* has an enormous variety of specialty meats including elk, venison, quail and even rattlesnake. All deeply frozen of course. The bacon is Amish or Mennonite from Ohio. I buy duck breasts and legs here. The Wagyu beef cheeks are incredible.

I'm putting *Parma Sausage* here because they only sell meat. In particular, they sell fresh Italian sausage (my favorite is the Sicilian with its intense garlic and cracked black pepper) along with their own prosciutto (aged in the upper floors of the building) made from Berkshire pigs. They also have interesting (frozen) sausages including bangers. And finally, they have cotechino¹.

And while we're talking sausage, *Salty Pork Bits* is a recent innovation. Again, you're spending money here. It's much more expensive than Parma but the variety is larger and it's more than just Italian. Check out the website for more info.

3.1 Fish

Unfortunately, Pittsburgh isn't close to a coast, so seafood is inconvenient at best. Giant Eagle's seafood is pathetic with the Squirrel Hill branch leading with the most unappealing fish anywhere.

Wholeys (pronounced "Wooleys") in the Strip is the best place for fish in my view. It's not outrageous and it has everything you'd want. Also has a large quantity of frozen fish along with a decent selection of smoked fish.

Penn Avenue Fish is a breakoff of the now long closed Benkovitz. And while their fish is certainly fish and looks great, it is also expensive. And, it appears that their real interest is in their restaurant, not in providing retail fish service.

I'd be remiss if I failed to include *Whole Foods*. As everyone knows, their prices are high (they're not nicknamed "Whole Paycheck" for nothing) but the prices are particularly high for most fish (at last check, the price for sea

¹Cotechino is a charcuterie product traditional to Modena (home of Ferrari). It is classically served with lentils. It isn't good for you (salt and fat load) but it is very tasty when served with a robust red wine.

scallops was \$28 a pound). That being said, they only sell sustainable fish — and that’s worth something. I believe that after their acquisition by Amazon, their selection has gone downhill.

4 European

The prime Italian food purveyor is *Pennsylvania Macaroni*, a.k.a. “PennMac”. It is a classic Italian foodstore with an incredible choice of olive oils, pasta, vinegars, cheeses and Italian packaged goods. The cheese counter is rightly famous². If I have any gripe about the cheeses, it’s that they carry very little french cheese. This seems to be changing along with increased stock of great American cheese. They also have Breadworks bread but only carry the Epis on Saturday (too bad).

Bloomfield has the old line supplier *Donatellos*. It’s a faint shadow of PennMac, but still has a few items.

Across from Children’s Hospital is *Chantal’s Specialty Cheese Shop*. They have much less than PennMac and their prices are higher. However, they do carry cheeses that PennMac doesn’t. They also carry *La Querca* prosciutto ... It is incredibly good (yes, better than Parma).

As for fresh pasta (if you don’t make it yourself), you can find it at PennMac (just ask for it as you check out).

4.1 Pierogis

The Pittsburgh mills were populated by Eastern Europeans, particularly Ukrainians, Czechs and Poles. The mills are gone, but what remains are pierogis.

It’s across the 31st bridge in Etna, but *Copout Pierogis* is worth a mention. The name derives from the owner’s other profession (a police offer). In this spotless store, you can buy interesting variations: there’s the Reuben, redolent in corned beef, sauerkraut and cheese. There’s the Buffalo Chicken wing, spicy and fatty...

Next time you’re coming back from the airport, take the back way. You have two options: You can go to *Forgotten Taste* located on the dark side of Moon or you can drive by *Pierogis Plus* in McKeesport. Pierogis’s Plus has the Breakfast Pierogi, and that means eggs and bacon.

Finally, if you want to get a true Pittsburgh experience, go to the *St. John Ukrainian Church* on Thursday afternoon. You might buy them from babooshka wearing a Steelers do-rag. We did. But this is only one of several churches that can supply pierogis. Do the research!

Finally, you can buy them in the Strip. *P&D Polish Foods* has home made straight ahead pierogis: mushroom, potato and cheese. And, you can

²It was run by Carol who knows her cheeses. Unfortunately, she retired and moved to Oklahoma.

pick up smoked sausages too along with a host of other polish foodstuffs.

4.2 Kosher

Murray Avenue Kosher is the source for all things jewish and kosher. Most notably, they have a wide variety of smoked and pickled fish along with baked goods. If you need kosher cheese (say, if you invite your kosher neighbors for wine and cheese...) then this is the place.

5 Middle Eastern

Stamoolis in the Strip is a full line Greek food supplier. Great place for feta cheese and bulk nuts and beans. It's worth a stop to see what's of personal interest.

Salems supplies halal meat (including local goat and lamb) and a reasonable (but not extensive) collection of middle eastern spices and other requirements. They also have large bags of charcoal (in season).

Not quite mideastern, but *Kohli's Indian Foods* on Craig Street is your source for everything subcontinent. Besides spices and papadums, they also have a limited selected of vegetables (but hot peppers they have!). A complete selection of dal, of course.

6 Asian

Lotus is the largest and best lit Asian market in the Strip. It's emphasis is Chinese but they also have a decent selection of Japanese snack foods (if that's your thing). They also have fresh fish on ice back in the corner. They do home delivery for a \$30 minimum. *Wing Fat Hong* is packed with foodstuffs and is often my go-to for Asian food simply because it's closer to where I often park. They just moved across the street from their old digs and the new place is spacious and well lit. But if you are driving home on Smallman, you should check out *Many More*. It's packed and features mainly Chinese food. They do have Laksa packages if your craving for Singapore food is outsized. They have fresh and frozen fish in the back. Finally, the latest store to open is in Squirrel Hill: *Panda Mart* on Forbes. They have a limited selection, but it's certainly the closest Chinese food store to the universities and has everything you need but not desire.

Tokyo is a tiny little store in Shadyside. It happens to be the only authentic Japanese store in Pittsburgh. But they have all the supplies to make Sukiyaki or sushi. Japanese videos play in the background. A nice place with friendly service. They have a few kinds of fish eggs, especially tobiko no tamago (but frozen).

New Youngs is at the bottom of Murray and Forward. It's possibly the largest Korean foodstore in the area, but that's not saying much. Just a few

fresh vegetables, but otherwise it's packaged or frozen. It has what you need but not what you want. *Seoul Mart* is closer to CMU and is also very tiny. It's a toss-up which one to use.

7 Mexican

For many years, the only source for mexican foodstuffs was *Reyna's* in the strip. They have barrels of dried peppers in the back (the source of my chipotle craving) along with a custom made tortilla machine. Their tortillas are indeed very nice.

But if you're willing to travel to Brookline (but that's across a bridge...), you can go to an authentic carniceria: *Las Palmas*. They don't have the peppers in bulk or those nice tortillas, but they've got everything else including a Mexican butcher. Chorizo!

8 Bakeries

Madeline's Bakery and Bistro in Regent Square (609 S. Trenton Avenue) is a very small intimate bakery. It's off a side street in a very unassuming location.

Allegro Hearth Bakery in Squirrel Hill does an enormous restaurant business but you can find any number of delicious breads. They have certain breads that they make on certain days, for example, they only make the cherry and chocolate bread on Wednesdays. An excellent option.

La Gourmandine's baguettes have been going downhill. Their pastry isn't bad, but their croissants are just too puffy and not crispy enough. The Pain aux raisins are missing the pastry creme. We like the gougères. They are found in Lawrenceville, Mt. Lebanon and in Hazelwood.

Gaby et Jules opened in Squirrel Hill and wins raves for their macarons. Too bad they cost an arm and a leg. And their pastry? \$3 for a croissant? I'm sorry, but not for me. Good bread and pastry should not be a luxury.

Enrico Biscotti (a.k.a. "Larry's") is the source for biscotti. They also make nice looking pies and feature Panettone around Christmas time.

Five Points Bakery has been open a while. They are on Wilkins near the Rehab Center. Their baguettes are of the chewy variety. Nice sticky buns. They have a fougasse but it isn't quite what you'd find in the south of France. But very tasty as a bagel substitute!

Prantl's Bakery in Shadyside is a Pittsburgh tradition for their famous burnt almond torte. Otherwise, it's a conventional American bakery.

Pink Box Bakery is an Asian bakery in Squirrel Hill. If you're looking for a red-bean pastry, this is the place.

Jean-Marc Chatellier set up shop in Millvale many years ago. Then the flood came and literally wiped the town away. It still hasn't recovered but the bake shop returned. It's pretty good but you have to cross a bridge.

Moio's Italian Pastry shop is worth a special mention. Stop by if you're coming back via the Turnpike, it's the first exit. You'll find all number of Italian cookies and pastries but most importantly, you'll find sfogliatella and pastaciotti.

And finally, the Northside features *Breadworks*. You can buy some of their breads at PennMac. My/our favorite bread is the Epi ("wheat stalk").

And you may be wondering: where are the bagels? A recent addition is *Pigeon Bagels* located near the corner of Beacon and Wightman. It's an incredible \$2 a bagel. A surprising option are the bagels available from *Spirit*, an eccentric space in Lawrenceville. They sell bagels and handmade lox at the Bloomfield market.

9 Beer Whine and Spirits

If I start to whine about the state owned and operated wine and liquor stores I might not complete the rest of this document. Suffice it to say the staff are ignorant and otherwise unknowledgeable and not helpful. The selection is limited and contrary to the propaganda, the prices are not particularly reasonable except for a few bargains. All in all, a pathetic system and a result of political patronage. The store in East Liberty next to Whole Foods has the best local selection (to me).

You can, however, order directly from a winery out of state. If you don't mind paying the shipping, this is a way to get unobtainable wines.

However, let us praise the emergence of microbreweries. Originally started by the stalwart *Penn Brewery* and *Church Brew Works*, newer and more delicious beer suppliers have emerged. I am particularly fond of the *East End Brewery* located in Larimer (behind Bakery Square). And of late even more suppliers have sprouted including *Roundabout* and *11th Hour* in Lawrenceville, the *Grist House* in Millvale, *Dancing Gnome* in Aspinwall, *Voodoo* in both NewKen and Homestead and finally *Brew Gentlemen* in Braddock. There are more and more opening every week.

A close relative is the *Arsenal* cidery. Located in a house in Lawrenceville, it is a typical story: couple decides to make cider and sell it and it takes off like a rocket. If you stop by during the weekend, you'll find it busy busy busy.

And finally, there are more and more distilleries. *Wigle* distillery was one of the first (if not *the* first). They started out with just a limited product line but now produce a wide variety of whiskeys and gins. Aging is done in different wood barrels. It's well worth a trip when you're in the Strip.

10 Supermarkets

So, what about the dreaded supermarkets? *Giant Eagle* is the local monopoly. Until *Whole Foods* showed up they didn't even try to compete. Now, they've

introduced “Market(ing) District” in a failed attempt to compete. It’s a larger and better lit store but the seafood is still terrible and the meat fairly bleah. And the cheese selection? Just posturing. The one exception is Jamieson Lamb (when they have it).

And speaking of *Whole Foods*... They’re not called “Whole Paycheck” for nothing (see Fish section above). So, I pick and choose carefully when I shop here. They sometimes have Bell and Evans ducks, so that’s a plus. The cheese prices are *outrageous*. Choose carefully.

I don’t buy from *Trader Joes* generally because they provide prepackaged fruit and veg (what?) and many premanufactured meals. They can supply interesting cheeses on occasion. Don’t look for wine here, that’s a state monopoly (see above).

And speaking of prepackaged, the German chain *Aldi* is on Baum. I’ve never been.

The northwest chain *Costco* is available (across a bridge...) in Homestead. I personally have never found much of appeal there. Your aesthetics may differ.

11 Spices

The aforementioned strip veg places in the strip sometimes have fresh herbs. You can also find both fresh and dried spices at PennMac. The quality is not as good as you might want, but the prices are... The national chain *Penzey’s* is also located in the strip. In my opinion, their spices are of variable quality. Their peppercorns are great. Their sage is filled with stems. Be careful. Kohli’s is the only place for Indian spices nearby.

12 Miscellaneous

As mentioned earlier, the city provides space for the Public Markets. I regret it deeply when they close in late November.

The *East End Coop* is a classical co-op. People who like (and value) that experience will shop there. I haven’t been in years.

Wild Purveyors is a place to obtain foraged mushrooms, ramps and other wild growths. Be prepared to pay appropriately.

13 Conclusion

The food scene in Pittsburgh has improved dramatically over the past decade. Fresh meat and veg are readily available. You too can cook “Farm to table”. The improvement is impressive. As a cook, you will appreciate the wide variety that is now available — it’s not Portland and it’s not the Bay Area, but it’s getting better all the time.