



ESSAY

THE LONG-FORM BURRITO CHAMPION OF THE WORLD

THOMAS BURKE

A tough act to swallow

At the New Year's party I attended last year, everyone was talking about a cook-off that had happened the weekend before, one that apparently everyone but me had taken part in—a cold hot dog salad cook-off. Conversations orbited around unusual questions, like whether or not to cook pre-cooked wieners for a salad, and what had really differentiated the four hot dog ceviche entries.

Then, about an hour after the ball dropped, the mastermind of the cook-off presented an Oreo cream cake made from the creamy centers he'd scraped out of several dozen Double Stufs. It was piled high and molded, then drizzled with a Lambrusco reduction. He called it the Oriole.

"That's Tim," the host told me. "He's a competitive eater. You know, like the Nathan's hot dog contest? Have you ever

seen that on TV?"

He then walked me across the room to the television console and showed me his copy of *Major League Eating: The Game*, for Nintendo Wii.

This is Tim's eater profile for the video game—collected information, I would learn, that is all based on fact:

Tim Janus

aka: Eater X
New York, NY
Age: 31
Weight: 165 lbs

Forced to wear a mask to conceal his inner torment, Eater X is currently the number-four-ranked eater in the world. A professional stock trader by day, Eater X has shown up

at contests in all sorts of disguises. He's called himself the Whaler, the Invisible Man, and also competed in a bikini. At the World Posole Eating Championship, Janus assumed the personality and dress of Helen Haggerty, a fictional field hockey player from Bryn Mawr College.

Tim's cartoon likeness was also there in the video game, proof that I was indeed partying with the number-four competitive eater in the world. I was intrigued—enough so that I even considered trying a slice of the Oriole.

Tim is the titleholder in six categories recognized by the International Federation of Competitive Eating (IFOCE): tamales¹, cannoli², tiramisu³, long-form burritos⁴, ramen noodles⁵, and Nigiri sushi⁶. Throughout his childhood, Tim kept secret tabs on how many slices of pizza he could eat per sitting, slowly increasing his intake over time. He drinks at least two liters of Pepsi One soda every day, which he often

sloshes back straight from the bottle; he craves flavor, hates water, and is very calorie conscious. He has experimented with a lot of unusual foods; he once ate a raw chicken breast because of his insatiable culinary curiosity (incidentally, he says its

taste and texture are akin to sashimi).

From what I've gathered, competitive eaters are a strange breed, especially when you consider that there is almost no possibility, not even for the top eaters in the world, of ever winning in prize money what they shell

out over their careers in airfare, hotels, and practice food.

Eccentric, yes, but you wouldn't necessarily be able to pick one out of a lineup. They come in all shapes and sizes and have day jobs like the rest of us. The top eaters in the world include a student, a construction worker, a New York City subway train conductor, a chef, the manager of a food court on an air force base, and the day manager of a strip club and steakhouse. A few are in advertising, some work with

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1. 71 tamales in 12 minutes by Tim Janus on September 1, 2007.
2. 26 large cannoli in 6 minutes by Tim Janus and Cookie Jarvis (tied) on September 15, 2006.
3. 4 lbs tiramisu in 6 minutes by Tim Janus on March 5, 2005.
4. 11.81 lbs long-form burritos in 10 minutes by Tim Janus on September 22, 2007.
5. 10.5 lbs ramen noodles in 8 minutes by Tim Janus on October 27, 2007.
6. 141 pieces of nigiri sushi in 6 minutes by Tim Janus on April 11, 2008.

computers; there's a postal worker, and even a spinal surgeon.

As for Tim, he grew up in Connecticut, went to college in Texas on a full-ride academic scholarship, and currently lives in Manhattan, where he works in an upscale pizzeria. It's not that Nintendo Wii has its facts wrong, but day trading is in the past for Tim. It was his first job out of college, and while he made a successful run of it for many years, that ended abruptly when the firm he'd been with went belly-up in 2004.

That was really all it took for Tim to enter his first contest: joblessness and a lifelong ability to eat very large amounts of food. On St. Patrick's Day 2004, he competed in a corned beef and cabbage⁷ contest.

Tim did well that day, but not well enough to place. Crucially, though, he learned what it would take to become a contender: he saw the fifth gear of eating, that is, cruise-controlled, break-neck oral consumption for six, ten, even twelve minutes straight. Seeing people eat like that is what lured him to the sport—he couldn't eat that fast yet, but he wanted to, and so the challenge appealed to his highly competitive nature. Tim explained his motivations behind eating to me this way: "Initially, it was just for a day of fun, and then it was like, you know what? I think I can do better, and then I won. And then it was, can I do better from what I just learned in that contest? And then it was, can I find

other ways of doing better? And then it was, how good can I get?"

As one of the best competitive eaters in the world, Tim has mastered that overdrive speed of eating. I saw him eat in a contest a few months ago, though as awesome as it was, seeing it didn't inspire me toward competitive eating.

I saw him eat at a pizza contest in New York on a Sunday morning in October. The event was held at Times Square's Military Island, which is a strip of sidewalk just below where Broadway and 7th Avenue cross between 43rd and 44th Streets. The cement island was cordoned off with metal pedestrian blockades, and by 10 A.M. the interior area was already filled with tourists.

This contest was sponsored by Famous Famiglia, and, as in other sports, competitive eating wouldn't survive without sponsorship. There are complications, though. In professional sports, there are timeouts, huddles, and free throws—plenty of opportunities for audience members to absorb marketing efforts; however, eating contests, at a maximum length of twelve uninterrupted minutes, have no halftimes or need for Zamboni breaks. As a solution, the IFOCE developed a fluff-filled, multiple-hour pregame. For example, the Famous Famiglia event was approximately three hours long, but the actual pizza eating lasted only ten minutes.

At about 10:15 A.M., Times Square got its

7. 10.63 lbs corned beef & cabbage in 10 minutes by Patrick Bertoletti on March 16, 2007.

first bit of entertainment. Three men in red aprons began spinning pizza dough between their legs and high up into the air boomerang style, with dough occasionally flopping down on the heads of unsuspecting audience members. This dough handiwork is called freestyle acrobatic dough tossing—one of very few sports more esoteric than competitive eating—and as I watched, I wondered in which Famous Famiglia pizzeria they'd learned their tricks: LaGuardia? Newark Terminal C3?

Then a very tall, very pear-shaped gentleman in a black suit and black shades worked his way through the crowd. This was Big Rob, and he had a clear Plexiglas briefcase full of cash, ostensibly the sixteen thousand in prize money. Big Rob was joined by the "paisanas," a baker's dozen of well-endowed, scantily clad women. "The Star-Spangled Banner" was performed a cappella by a woman who, I believe, is the daughter of a Famous Famiglia executive. The Famous Famiglia famiglia was introduced, Mama Rosa on down to Giorgio. Once-retired competitive eater and never-retired rapper Badlands Booker⁸ performed on demand four times (his albums, *Hungry and Focused I-IV*, are available on Amazon.com). A little person in a top hat danced on stage for some reason. An IFOCE staff member sang ABBA's "Mamma Mia." And it was all orchestrated, exceeded, peppered with one-liners,

and sprinkled with fairy dust by a man in a straw boater's hat, Richard Shea, co-founder, with his brother, of the IFOCE—together they're its Don King, Vince McMahon and Ronald McDonald.

During this hoopla, the eaters hid out backstage, being interviewed, chitchatting, or listening to MP3 players. Tim was back there too, the many colors of his face paint glistening—on this day, he'd painted multilayered axe heads around his eyes with the clean lines of a totem pole animal. He was sitting alone reading the paper; he had separated himself from the others.

One reason was that he'd had a fight with his girlfriend the night before. Relationships with competitive eaters can be difficult: "They get jealous," Tim said. "Like, my girlfriend was jealous of hot dogs⁹ because I was spending a lot of time with hot dogs during hot dog season. . . it makes sense, I get why."

But more than that, Tim is confronting a growing disenchantment with the competitive eating scene. He's learned to swallow the three-ring circus aspect of it, but competition keeps getting fiercer and his motivations aren't so clear, even to himself. Plus, he told me as a matter of fact that the best he'd do in Famous Famiglia pizza would be third place. "For me," Tim said, "if I want to be good at it, I have to try and find out why I'm doing it." That morning, I think, Tim had two things on his mind: one, he's protective of what he's

achieved, and two, since it seems he won't get rich from eating doughnuts¹⁰ or baked beans¹¹ anytime soon, he's brainstorming new ways to grow with the IFOCE: host a cooking show, become an announcer, write a book, that sort of thing.

Even simpler, Tim is a veteran eater now, and I think he misses the old days, when his learning curve was steep and things weren't so serious. It used to be a lot more fun. Just a few years ago, he took a road trip with a few other top competitive eaters. The idea was to hit as many eating challenges as possible in a weekend. Challenges are different than contests. Think John Candy vs. the "Old '96er" in the 1988 movie *The Great Outdoors*—Candy finishes the famed ninety-six-ounce steak, and the entire family eats for free.

First on the list was a humongous pizza in St. Louis: free pizza, but no cash prize. Tim told me they ate in pairs. "It was a giant pizza, but very thin. We did it super fast, in about four minutes."

The next day they did another pizza

challenge, also in pairs, though this one paid. "The pizza was much thicker and weighed a whole lot. It was really chewy. . . We didn't want to tip our hand and let the guy know that he had a couple of ringers there, so we had Joey¹² and Paul¹³ go really

slow and barely do it, and then me and Pat¹⁴ just got down and blew through it. The guy had to write two five-hundred-dollar checks."

"Then we had a milkshake challenge later on. It was just for fun—and it was delicious." Six twenty-

four-ounce milkshakes in twenty minutes, which they all did. "It was cool because milkshakes, I didn't realize this, when you eat that much cold, that much freezing food, it lowers your core body temperature from the inside out. Normally if you go outside and it's cold, you start to freeze from the outside—your skin is cold. Here, your forehead is hot, and if you touch your stomach, it's freezing. And you start to shiver because you've lowered your body temperature a few degrees."

Incidentally, Tim was the test subject

The most successful athletes train vigorously, and in this case training means eating increasingly larger quantities of food.

8. Eric Booker—#13 in the world with nine world records.

9. 66 Nathan's Famous hot dogs and buns in 12 minutes by Joey Chestnut on July 4, 2007.

10. 49 glazed doughnuts in 8 minutes by Eric Booker on October 2, 2002.

11. 8.4 lbs of baked beans in 2 minutes 47 seconds by Sonya Thomas on August 7, 2004.

12. Joey Chestnut—#1 in the world, currently holds fifteen world records.

13. Hall Hunt—#7 in the world, considered a top newcomer, also a MENSA member.

14. Pat Bertoletti—#2 in the world with twenty-two world records.

for the first-ever study on the effects of competitive eating on the human body, which was made into a National Geographic Channel documentary. These are atypical stresses on the body, and while contests aren't daily occurrences, the most successful athletes train vigorously, and in this case training means eating increasingly larger quantities of food so that come game time, a stomach can dilate to an extraordinary size. Further, Tim doesn't eat anything but candy for a few days before a contest so that during competition, as his stomach fills with food, his empty lower gastrointestinal tract can compress in on itself, making more room for his expanding stomach. He chooses to get calories from candy because "sugar burns off very cleanly, kind of like ethanol." And the results of the study? Inconclusive.

The final stop on the road trip was a chili dog challenge in Michigan. There, Tim beat the record¹⁵, and his wallet got another five hundred dollars fatter.

Details of this road trip surfaced on the internet, however, and the Shea brothers quickly responded by forbidding IFOCE eaters from participating in eating challenges, and all contest participants must belong to the IFOCE. Understandably, the Shea brothers want a cut of everything relating to the competitive eating industry, an industry they created and continue to work hard at legitimizing and expanding.

I saw Richard Shea working hard that Sunday morning in Times Square. He

effortlessly rattled off the following introduction for Tim:

13.7 billion years ago, all matter and energy in the universe was compressed into one single, infinitely small point, and the pressure was so great that it created a singularity, an explosion that sent matter and energy coursing out and creating the universe as it did. And as that matter and energy cooled it created gases, and as the gases cooled and clumped together, they created planets. And as the planets cooled, chemicals on the earth's surface began to combine in ever more complex ways until one day life was born. And one form of life climbed from the ocean and gained consciousness, the ability to observe that the observer and the observed are one in the same. And one species of life stood on the ground and opened his round, wide eyes. And what did he see? He saw the great tiramisu eating champion of the world. He saw the cannoli eating champion of the world. A masked man who conceals his identity. A great man, ladies and gentlemen, from New York, New York, let me hear it for Tim Janus!

There was a great deal of excitement and anticipation as the eaters were introduced and brought on stage, though how could there not have been after so many

hours in wait? The eaters were lined shoulder to shoulder facing the tabletop where dozens of pizzas and their assorted beverages had been laid out.

All of the eaters were wearing Famous Famiglia sports jerseys, too, though, amazingly, they seemed to be one-size-fits-all. Sure, the tiniest of the competitors is 105 pounds¹⁶, but there are definitely some large folks on the circuit, too, and they looked a bit silly squeezed into those jerseys—one even cut his jersey and wore it pulled down around his neck like a Famous Famiglia-brand dickey.

As soon as everyone was situated, the starting gun went off and immediately their various strategies were apparent. Some hopped around as they chewed, others stacked their slices two or three thick, but the most effective was to stuff, chew and swallow whole slices at a time, over and over again, for the entire ten minutes. Two eaters, Joey Chestnut and Pat Bertoletti, were far and away the fastest, and the contest turned into a one-on-one battle between those two. They hit ten slices, twenty slices, thirty, forty slices of

pizza—without slowing their pace. Their upper lips and chins were red with pizza sauce; their jaws chomped feverishly; their nimble fingers found back recesses of the mouth in which to stuff pizza.

There is a no-upchuck rule in these contests, and, with practice, competitive eaters learn to control those reflexes. Tim told me that although there are exceptions, there is only one type of throwing up that happens often in competition, "a toned down version," when

food gets sent back up, "just from mid-throat, and then people have to swallow it again."

Yes, swallowed again and followed shortly thereafter with a few more pounds of Spam¹⁷ or a couple hundred gyoza¹⁸.

Tim does not purge after competitions, either—it all goes through. According to Tim, true and fair competitive eaters must complete three actions with the food they eat in a contest: chew, swallow and digest. Only chewing may be abandoned, which is occasionally a strategy. Eaters have been known to swallow food items whole during heated bouts, like Buffalo wings¹⁹ on

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15. 43.5 chili dogs in four hours by Tim Janus in March 2006.

16. Sonya Thomas—#7 in the world, currently holds seventeen world records.

17. 6 lbs of SPAM in 12 minutes by Richard LeFevre on April 3, 2004.

18. 231 chicken and vegetable gyoza in 10 minutes by Joey Chestnut on August 23, 2008.

19. 7.5 lbs of Buffalo chicken wings in 12 minutes by Joey Chestnut on May 21, 2007.

the bone.

I didn't see any swallowing of whole slices of pizza in Times Square, but Tim did manage a very impressive feat—he actually picked up his pace with two minutes left. As predicted, he was battling for third. It was also clear that of the fifteen or so other competitors, none were even close to as fast as the top four.

The entire crowd—myself included—shouted out the count-down of the final ten

seconds, even though by then it was clear that Joey Chestnut was going to win. In the end, he had managed to eat forty-five slices, which is a slice of cheese pizza every 13.3 seconds for ten minutes straight.

Tim came in fourth place, eating one slice every 18.75 seconds for a total of thirty-two slices of pizza. His share was \$1,500 of the \$16,000 purse, a prize total that is trumped only by the Nathan's Famous and Krystal Hamburgers contests. \$1,500 was a very good day for Tim, and because this contest was in New York, he didn't have airfare or hotel costs to recoup, either.

The crowd cheered for a minute or two, then immediately dispersed. Joey and Pat, who'd been neck and neck the entire contest, were bombarded with interviewers and autograph hunters, but the other eaters wandered backstage as unencumbered as I did. Genuinely impressed with Tim's performance, I congratulated him. I also

made a point of congratulating the other eaters too, ones who hadn't eaten half what Joey Chestnut had.

Tim was gracious, but I could tell he wanted to be interviewed or to get out of there. I didn't blame him—the post-game had me feeling sullied, somehow, so I didn't stick around either.

“My friends and family ask me how long I'll last,” Tim told me once, “and with the way the universe expands, the year that I see myself getting out

continues to push farther and farther away from me. I'm thinking, right now, probably three years left. Probably one year of being very serious about it, one year of being less serious about it, and one year of just focusing on Nathan's and Krystal Hamburgers. And I think that's because I'll be less interested, because I'll have more demands on my time here, probably because it's going to be more and more competitive, and I'll just get sick of the routine of it.”

The Nintendo Wii profile said Tim was “forced to wear a mask to conceal his inner torment.” I see torment, but it's not between Tim and his alter ego, Eater X. For maybe the first time, it seems they're both confounded. Tim first retreated to Eater X four years ago because of emptiness he felt as a day trader on Wall Street, but now Eater X seems to feel emptiness too, even after so much eating.

I applaud Tim for his departure from

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the ordinary those years ago—in theory, it's the kind of risk most of us wish we'd take more often in life, even if the possibilities for success aren't that great.

Maybe what's next for Tim will have something to do with Helen Haggerty, the field hockey player from Bryn Mawr. I understand she can be unpredictable, impulsive, and even aggressive. That's my dream anyway, that Tim and Helen set out together, in disguise, on another eating challenge road trip—testing their capacities with unique feats of greatness while simultaneously staving off the increasingly loud sirens' song of a more stable livelihood. I'd be glad to know someone is out there doing it, even if it's only for a short while longer. 🍌