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How The McDonald's McRib Became A Cult Superstar

By [Kate Sitarz](#) Published on 11/21/2016 at 12:12 PM



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If you're a McRib fan, you know the feeling of wondering if you'll ever see the sandwich again. You feel anxiety not knowing how long the good times will last. And when they end (as they always do), you feel the emptiness in your soul like a punch to the gut.

Luckily, it's McRib season once again! The famous porkrificness is coming to Chicago for a limited time from November 21 to December 25. And because there's nothing more American than a road trip for fast food sandwiches, you can drive to Chi Town in less than 24 hours from most US cities (sorry, Hawaiians and Alaskans). Or you can experience the excitement right now by visiting [mcribseason.com](#).

But how did we get to the point of driving cross-country for the McRib? Here's how the humble sandwich turned into a superstar of fanatic proportions.

The chicken shortage heard 'round the world

We can thank McNuggets for birthing the McRib. When McNuggets were first trotted out in select McDonald's markets in 1979, chicken meat dried up as demand outpaced supply at franchises across the country. With dwindling supplies impacting their ability to produce nuggets fast enough to satiate fast food fans, McDonald's was looking for a quick and easy way to keep customers coming through their doors. Necessity is the mother of invention -- and it turns out the McRib was the necessity we didn't know we needed.





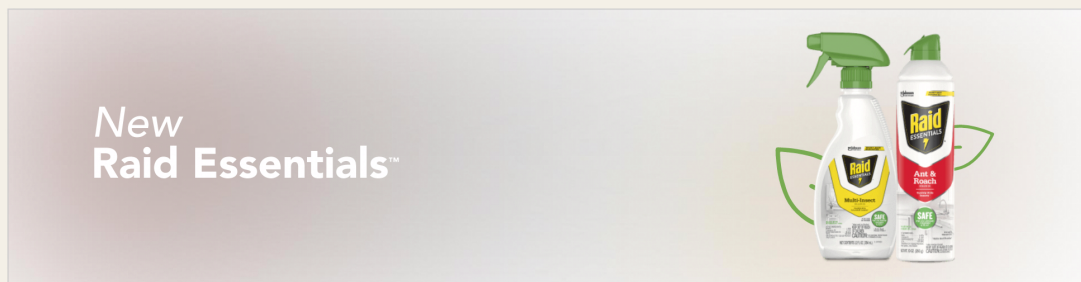
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The secret recipe

McDonald's first executive chef Rene Arend (whose resume not only includes creating the McNugget, but also preparing dinners for Queen Elizabeth II) is credited with coming up with the sandwich. It all started when the European-born, French-trained chef found himself exploring the local cuisine in South Carolina.

Arend was visiting Charleston, S.C. when he found inspiration in the region's famous pulled pork. As the head of McDonald's corporate product development at the time, Arend was responsible for coming up with the next big thing. He believed the combo of flavors in the pulled pork sandwich—smoky meat dripping in tangy barbeque sauce—could be McDonald's next signature item. His only hang-up was the shape. Many asked, "Why not just keep it round?" But Arend wanted it to look like a slab of ribs.

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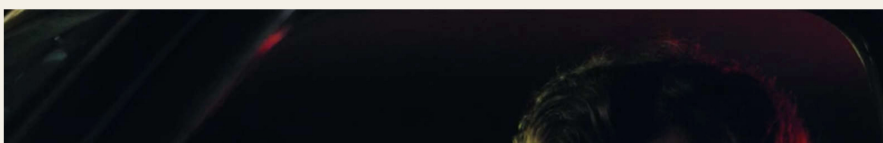
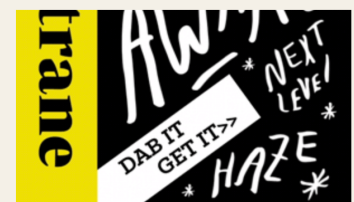


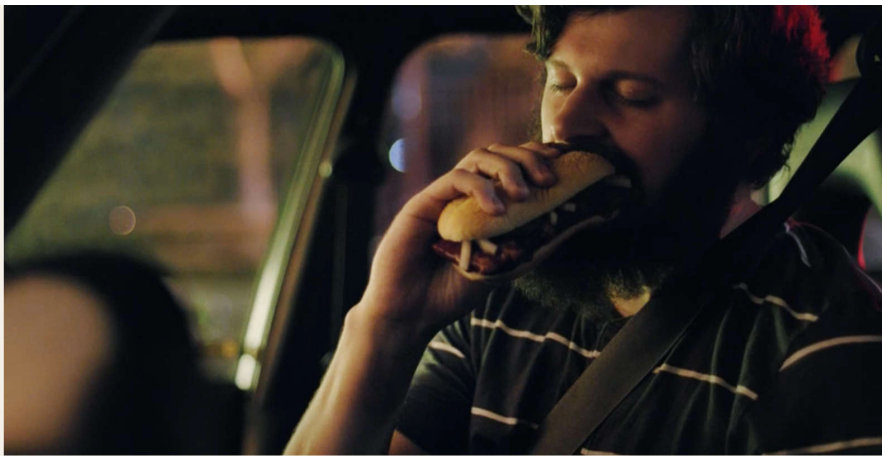
The mysterious shape

But how does the McRib look like a rack of ribs when there are no ribs?!

Turns out, the secret sauce behind this sandwich isn't the sauce, it's the McRib shaping technology. Roger Mandigo, a University of Nebraska emeritus science professor, created the technology that makes the McRib's iconic shape possible. The man's a genius.

Using salt to extract proteins from the meat, Mandigo used these proteins as an emulsifier. At this point, the meat can be formed into any shape you want. Machines press the meat into the iconic slab-of-ribs shape, much like how you shape pasta or a burger. Modest Mandigo insists he wanted the sandwich to look like a pork chop, so it's Chef Arend that still gets credited with the rack-o-ribs idea.





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The appearance...

Once the shape was finalized, the McRib was tested out at various McDonald's in 1981.

Midwesterners particularly took to the sandwich. Turns out, its status as a limited time menu item was part of its appeal. After early tests at a smattering of restaurants, the McRib quickly gained a following of pork worshippers.

And then, just as fast as it had burst onto the scene, it was gone.

...And disappearance

In 1985, the McRib vanished from backlit menus everywhere. There one day. Gone the next. Did chickens come back in stock? Did pork run out? Was it all part of an elaborate plot from a McDonald's marketing mastermind? Customers had questions. No one had answers.

But the sudden, mysterious disappearance only made the public go wild. To customers, the McRib was anything but a failure. Seemingly overnight, the McRib went from ordinary menu item to the blueprint for how to launch a limited time, fast food legend.

Moving a major commodities market

After a multi-year hiatus, McDonald's was ready to take the McRib nationwide. In 1981 McDonald's estimated that it could sell up to 80 million McRib sandwiches during a multi-week trial across 8,000 US restaurants. Despite no idea if the new menu item would become a permanent fixture after its limited release, the pork trading market went... hog wild.

According to the October 19, 1989 edition of the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

"Hog and pork belly futures rose yesterday at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange on news that McDonald's Corporation, the world's largest fast-food franchiser, would add a pork sandwich to its US menu...The news brightened the outlook for pork, which had dimmed on an apparent shift in supermarket advertising away from pork."

Pork traders rejoiced (and likely got rich). The rest of the country just headed to the golden arches to get their fix before the elusive sandwich disappeared again.

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Toying with our emotions

1994 marked a celebratory year for fans of the meaty pork, who could finally stop holding their breath for the sandwich's resurgence. Customers were enjoying the first of a solid 10 years of McRib bliss when the sandwich was a full-time menu staple. McRib lovers were jolted back to reality in 2005 when it was taken off the menu during its first of many farewell tours.





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The genius marketing

Throughout the years, the McRib has inspired mouthwatering marketing campaigns. In 2005, 2006, and 2007 the sandwich took farewell tours -- kinda like when KISS and Cher took farewell tours.

In 2011, there was the Quest for the Golden McRib. This Facebook game used Google maps to have players hunt for one of 10 virtual McRibbs packaged in gold at restaurants around the world. It was like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* only with meat. And how could we forget the Boneless Pig Farmers of America?

The perpetual fear of loss

Some say the McRib comes and goes because pork supply is more limited than beef supply. So, when pork costs start to rise, it comes off the menu. After all, half of what's to love is the sandwich only costs a few bucks.

Like the mystery surrounding Tupac's death (or disappearance?!) conspiracy theories only add to the McRib's allure. Other theories are more straightforward. Some say it's a recurring marketing stunt. Some say it's a deliberately sinister plot to deprive fans of their craving.



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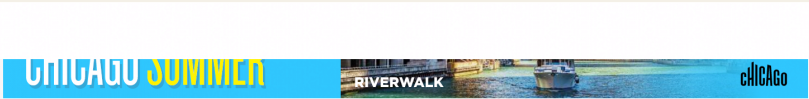
The pork-rich Germans

There's one place where the McRib never disappears. That Promised Land is Deutschland. The



sandwich is a menu staple there. After all, the Germans love pork and wild boars run rampant there.

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The sporadic recent reappearances

Turns out, not all McD's menus are created equal. Individual restaurants can throw the McRib on the menu whenever they want. And thanks to the genius that created the handy McRib Locator, you can find out which McDonald's are lovin' them at any given moment.

So start a petition to your local establishment, stat. And in the meantime, we'll always have Deutschland (and Chicago for those 34 glorious days this winter).



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