INQUIRER RESTAURANT CRITIC CRAIG LABAN
AND FOUR LOWER MERION TEENAGERS
DROVE 111 MILES TO 23 RESTAURANTS
AND ATE 52 SANDWICHES TO FIND
THE ULTIMATE CHEESESTEAK

AND THE WINNER IS ...
THE CHEESESTEAK PROJECT

Eat cheesesteaks for class credit? Four high school seniors join Craig LaBan on a quest for the best example of Philadelphia's gift to world cuisine.

In the beginning, they were simple cheesesteakaholics: from left Andy Shore, Josh Brawer, Jeffrey Steinberg and Tommy Conry. They would learn the finer points.

When Josh Brawer announced to his parents what he and three friends were planning for their senior project at Lower Merion High School, the reaction was skeptical.

"C'mon," said Josh's father, David. "You're going to go around eating cheesesteaks for a month? You've got to be kidding me."

To David Brawer, the projects tended to divide the high school seniors into two groups. There were the kids who'd take the month off before graduation to do something socially active, such as work for a charity or a political campaign. And there were the others, who'd do nothing but hang out at the old man's office.

In other words, the do-gooders and the slackers. Josh's cheesesteak adventure sounded - at least in the beginning - suspiciously as if he'd be joining the ranks of the latter. It sounded like a scam.

But it didn't seem silly to me when I was asked to mentor this project. Josh and his classmates Andy Shore, Jeffrey Steinberg and Tommy Conry would become my eating team.

After all, they were trying to answer one of the great culinary questions of our time: Who makes the best cheesesteak?

Talk about ambition. No food has defined our region more than this double-fisted roll of gusto. Nothing cuts across class lines, or bonds the generations with more unifying power, than this steamy-hot steak "wid" or "widout." (That's wid onions, if you have to ask.) The topic is an endless obsession, from gym locker rooms to the pages of the local media to Steinberg's car every time he and his buddies headed out of school for yet another lunch-period steak adventure.

Which is the best? Settling this question (at least once, though probably not for all) is a matter of regional preoccupation and a rite of gastronomic closure for these four friends about to leave for college. But it wouldn't be easy. Before it was over, the journey would take us 111 miles, through two states, 23 steakeries, 52 sandwiches and countless hours of challenging digestion.

In four days.

Ever since the first time my dad took me to Geno's, we have shared an incredible bond. During the car ride home, we began to argue over what really made the steak. I believed that it was the Whiz, while he claimed that the Amoroso's roll was integral. Apparently, we were both wrong.

- Josh Brawer's cheesesteak diary

The anatomy of a cheesesteak would appear simple enough - roll, meat, cheese and toppings. But how would we know the merely good ones from greatness?

My new students were experienced in the ravishing joy of attacking a juicy sandwich. I could see that the moment we met: Josh, the shy devotee of Classic Coke who loved to reminisce about his favorite cheesesteak; Jeff, the loquacious sophisticate, who had honed his palate during family dinners at the Palm; Andy, who wasn't going to let the cast on his arm from a basketball mishap get between him and a sandwich; and Tommy, the meticulous note-taker and future plastics engineer.

Four wide-eyed 18-year-old cheesesteakaholics. But they hesitated a moment when I informed them we would not be visiting a single steak shop that day, but several. Maybe even 20 if they could keep up. They were in the big leagues now. Their senior project was serious business. And it continued on next page.
manded a brief primer in the science of cheesesteak scrutiny.

There is the meat itself, I told them. It can range from rib-eye to top round to, yes, even beef knuckle (gulp?). But most important, how is it cooked? Look at the color of the meat before it hits the griddle. Is it as faded as an unripe tomato, drained of its flavorful juices? Or does it have a fresh crimson blush, marbled with the lacy white lines of fat that will bustle it?

Is the griddle a glorified factory, lined with a tall berm of precooked steaming meat? Or is each sandwich cooked to order, seared to a caramelized brown around the edges and placed on a roll still dripping its natural essence? Is it shredded to a hamburger fineness (a method I always find dry), or is the thinly sliced meat left lusciously intact? Is the meat seasoned?

This, we decided, was key. But there was so much more. The crusty rolls versus the soft ones. Whether the onions were fried to a sweet golden brown. The girth of the sandwich (for which we were armed with a ruler) mattered. So did the quality of the cheese (was it real Cheez Whiz, or imitation?). The fire of the chiles and sauces on the condiment bar counted for extra points. As did an authentic level of grittyitude at the cashier’s window.

Ultimately, we judged each restaurant on three sandwiches: a traditional steak with Whiz or American cheese, a specialty steak, and a chicken cheesesteak.

The variations we found were numbing. In fact, Josh Brawner returned home from our forays so bursting with nuances of the day’s investigations that his father — awakening to our project’s critical merit — soon wrote to me to address the “great hush” between him and his son.

“I come from the Secret-to-a-Great-Cheesesteak-Lies-in-the-Roll school and I have not been able to convince him of this basic truism. I wish you would work with him on this.”

If only it were so simple. The truth is that a transcendental steak must exist under perfect harmony, an ethereal melding of cheese and onion and juicy meat, swirling at the height of its flavors through your roll at that very moment you take a bite. Call it the perfect form of steaks.

Jeffrey Steinberg has his own name for this elusive trait: Good Drip.

I placed it down and opened it a tiny bit just to glance at the onions, meat and cheese all united. I then took a large and scruptious bite. The Whiz, oil and steak juice dripped out of the bottom. It was breathtaking.

— Jeffrey Steinberg's cheesesteak diary

Devotion to a particular cheesesteak is, for most Philadelphians, a territorial birthright. If you are from Roxborough, for example, you will most likely consider a sandwich piled with finely chopped meat at Dalessandro’s the definitive steak. If you are from Bala Cynwyd, the cheesy pouf of shredded meat that plumps the roll at Mama’s will define your preference. If you are from the Northeast, perhaps you were lucky enough to be weaned at Chink’s on Torressdale Avenue, the charming oldtime soda shop that, despite its un-PC name, serves one of the city’s best traditional steaks. That’s the only steak owners Joseph and Denise Groh will make — succulent rib-eye, American cheese, soft roll and onions.

If you are a visitor, a newly minted Philadelphian, or a night owl with a 2 a.m. case of the munchies, it is more likely that you have been initiated into the rites of steakery at the corner of South Ninth Street and Passyunk Avenue.

There’s still something quintessentially Philadelphia about making a pilgrimage at least once to this particular crossroads, where rivals Geno’s and Pat’s King of Steaks stare at each other across the sharply angled intersection like neon battleships ready to rumble. Sandwiched between the clang of auto body shop and the grunts of kids playing hoops in the park, mustangs cruise to a double-parked halting the crosswalk. And the faithful horde wait as long as it takes for the taste of Whiz-slashered steak on their lips.

In local lore, Pat’s King of Steaks has long been credited the honor of being invented this delicacy (with cheese) in the 1930s. But if these rival steaks were the focus of our debate, they wouldn’t last long. The tough-but-bavorful steak from Geno’s was far superior in heft and drip to the skinnily sandwich from Pat’s.

Neither titan, though, came close to snaring the crown. Nor did the sandwiches from two other tourist hot spots — the dry hamburger-like steaks on squishy rolls at Jim’s on South Street, and the bland, watery splashed skinnies at Rick’s in the Terminal Market, a descendant of the Olivieri family that founded Pat’s.

The best of the big-name eaters was Tony Luke’s Old Philadelphia Sandwiches on Oregon Avenue. Situated in the shadows of the I-95 overpass, it has all the genuine South Philly atmosphere one could want. The broad side walk awning is lit with yellow neon. The walls are covered with celebrity photos, continued on Page 1...
who knows what to do with a griddle, who plays the searing hot spots and cooler regions of his flat-top like a virtuoso. Frying each batch of meat and onions to order, deftly seasoning his steaks, strategically crumbling and folding his cheese into the middle, Bucci packed the marvelous seeded rolls from Carangi Baking Co. with nearly a pound of explosive flavors.

At the picnic tables outside, we took three bites and knew: Little John’s had taken all three categories by unanimous decision. The traditional cheesesteak was a cosmic flow of meat and molten American cheese. The steak with sauteed spinach and salty aged provolone lit our palates. The chicken steak — usually the dieter’s宠儿 — was as succulent as anything we tasted, and even better with a dark streak of sausage-infused red gravy.

“Wow...”

“This meat tastes so...”

“I’m bringing my dad...”

Their words kept disappearing into the sandwiches.

The catch is that John’s grill is open only weekdays and only until 2:30 p.m. Wait too long after noon, and those seeded rolls will be gone, too.

“You gotta come early, kid,” John Jr.’s mother, Vonda, told me curtly from behind the register. “We’re dedicated here to the working man.”

After I had eaten half I almost threw in the towel. Thank God my friends were there to save me. “You today, eat the rest of your steak,” they shouted. Ten minutes later, I left saturated along the back seat of Jeff’s car, reminiscing about the steak while falling asleep.

— Andy Shore’s cheesesteak diary

By the end of our odyssey, my students had honed their skills to the point where they could order four such steaks until I dropped a fifty, five-pound “bellly filler” from Larry’s Famous Steaks on the table.

He was right; this steak was a kitchen-sink mess.

Josh Brawer, too, had refined his tastes — even his dad had to admit that his son had “learned a lot. Go figure!”

David Brawer also says their conversations now incorporate the minutiae of steak shop talk. “I’ve never really been into talking about sports,” David said “but this has kind of taken the place of it.”

But for these friends, going in search of the great cheese steak, it turns out, was always about more than the consumption of an ultimate sandwich.

“For Josh and his buddies,” said David Brawer, “I think it represented freedom. To be able to pile into the car and go to places that were, if not taboo beyond the reach of parental control.”

That thrill of adventure may explain, at least in part, their frequent lunch-hour visits to unfamiliar neighborhoods in the city.

It may be no coincidence that their final steak frenzy came in the weeks before their departure for college. Josh, Andy and Jeffrey were heading off to Penn State, while Tommy was going to the University of Michigan.

Sure, they passed their senior project. Their teachers were “impressed,” Josh Brawer said, “that we actually learned something.”

But it was also as if making the summer rounds of their favorite steakeries was finally cementing their roots in place. No one expressed this better than Tommy, the only one going out of state. He wrote: “I have known the true greatness of Cheese Whiz mixed with fried onions and fried-up steak because I have Philly running through my veins (along with lot of cholesterol). Now that I am about to head out to the Midwest for college, only note that I am leaving the world of cheesesteaks behind...”
How they scored

ow many great cheesesteaks are there in the Philadelphia region? Far more than I and my four high-school-age eating machines could sample in four days. I'd still like to get to Leo's Steaks in Delaware County and sample the steak at Shank's & Evelyn's in South Philly. Even so, the cheesesteak tasting team made a serious dent, putting 23 restaurants to a triple-header test, basing our rating (with 5 being the best) on three styles of steaks — traditional, specialty, and chicken.

5 - Cheesesteak Paradise
John's Roast Pork, Snyder Avenue and Weccacoe Street, Philadelphia, 215-463-1951. This sandwich shack has existed in dubious obscurity since 1930. Aside from serving the city's best pork sandwiches, chef-owner John Bucci Jr. unanimously swept all three categories of the cheesesteak competition, serving up the best and perfectly seasoned, perfectly seared beef and chicken steaks on sturdy rolls with real cheese and crispily spun onion. It's open only weekdays through lunch.

3 - Will Satisfy the Craving
Geno's Steaks, 1219 S. Ninth St., Philadelphia, 215-389-0659. This South Philly institution usually beets rival Pat's on the day of our tasting. The steaks were meaty and full of juicy drip.
Sonny's Famous Steaks, 216 Market St., Philadelphia, 215-629-4828. The owner of this Old City newcomer takes her traditional steak seriously, slicing the domestic beef to order, and insisting on real Cheez Whiz (imagine). The result is a superbly tender, flavorful sandwich — as long as you keep it simple.
Chick's Deli of Cherry Hill, 906 Township Lane, Cherry Hill, 856-429-2022. I have fond memories of savouring chicken steaks from this back-alley find off Route 70 when I worked in Jersey years ago. But it was the beef steak this time that moved me, a perfect blend of flowing cheese, sweet onions and tender meat. White House Sub Shop, Mississippi and Arctic Avenues, Atlantic City, 609-945-8599. The light and crusty roll makes the steak at this casino-city institution.
Real Pizza, 100 N. Narberth Ave., Narberth, 610-661-1700. This low-key neighborhood pizzeria turned out a very respectable assortment of steaks, the most remarkable being a pizza steak, which gets excellent sauce, real pizza cheese and a smart turn in the oven to crisp up the top of the roll.
Donkey's Place, 1223 Haddon Ave., Camden, 856-566-2616. Imitated in great acclaim by an eatery in Manhattan, Donkey's specialty is a festivus of flavor on a Kaiser roll.
Steve's Prince of Steaks, 2711 Comly Rd., Philadelphia, 215-677-8020. This outpost of the Northeast chain is a stainless-steel food bar trimmed with white-and-black tile and a bulletproof glass viewing window. The unchopped meat has a minimalist effect, but is very tasty, with a particularly creamy white American cheese.
Abner's, 38th and Chestnut Streets, Philadelphia, 215-662-0100. At this University City institution, the standard steak was too dry and too finely chopped, but the pizza steak variation was a hit, with sauce and cheese that melded with the meat.
Grilladelphia, 2330 Aramingo Ave., Philadelphia, 215-739-3801. It gets points for turning one end of an Amano station convenience store into a serious steakery. The hollowed-out round rolls are unusual, but the steaks themselves are satisfying fare.
2 - If You Had To
Mama's Pizzeria, 426 Belmont Ave., Bala Cynwyd, 610-884-4757. This Main Line dairies has a particularly pink and frilly dining room as well as a secret blend of cheeses. Unfortunately, there was too much of that cheese, overwhelming what would otherwise be some tasty, finely shaved steaks, including the house special, ham-wrapped Corned Beef.
Rick's Steaks, Reading Terminal Market, 12th and Arch Streets, Philadelphia: 215-925-4320. At this Reading Terminal steak spot, the quality of the unchopped meat is decent. But it doesn't get seasoned, and there wasn't enough of it.
Jeffrey Steinberg gives full concentration to his assignment.

1 - Save the Calories
Pat's King of Steaks, 1237 E. Passyunk Ave., 215-468-1546. The inventor of the steak is coating its reputation, serving up dry, griddle-laced sandwiches at a famous corner that could use a good scrub.
Campos', 214 Market St., Philadelphia, 215-923-1000. With dried roses hanging in the bathroom, this was by far the quaintest steak shop on the tour. Unfortunately, the sandwiches were also far too polite, with parsimonious portions and sterile flavors.
Ishkabbibble's Eatery, 337 South St., Philadelphia, 215-923-4337. This South Street take-out window is famous for its chicken steaks, but we don't know why. The precooked breasts were smashed into such dry fibers it was like eating chicken drywall.
Larry's Famous Steaks, 2459 N. 54th St., Philadelphia, 215-879-1776. The home of the five-pound "bell" fillet was a bust. Too much food piled into a single, flabby roll, and it was unseasoned and of low quality. — Craig LaBan

Inquirer Magazine - 1

The new owner redecorated our steak from cooked meat sitting in Tapponwaon Year grill. We were even more shocked, though, to admit how good it tasted.
Dalessandro's, Henry Avenue and Walnut Lane, Philadelphia, 215-482-5407. The steak couldn't be nicer at this Roxborough classic, but the huge mound of steaming, mass-cooked meat on the griddle has a dryness that soaks the drip out of its generous sandwiches.
Jim's Steaks, 431 N. 62nd St., Philadelphia, 215-747-6615. The other branches got their black-and-white tile deco style from the original in West Philly, which is a sentimental favorite of my eating team. I'll cede this Jim's some of the best fried onions in town, but even the partisans had to admit the meat was stringy.
Jim's Steaks, 400 South St., Philadelphia, 215-928-1911. A tourist favorite, this ad-secloado steak gives a good shot of schmear of Whiz, but the meat is a little tough and the sandwich is inconsistent.