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Detroit Hot Dog Chain Sets Up In Chicago

Leo's Coney Island Specializes In Chili-Slathered Hot Dogs Popular In Motor City

CHICAGO (CBS) — The chili-slathered Coney Island dog makes its way from Detroit to Chicago with Monday's opening of Leo's Coney Island restaurant in the Lakeview neighborhood.

Leo's Coney Island has operated since 1972 in southeast Michigan, and now has about 40 locations in Detroit and its suburbs.

First, what makes a Detroit Coney Island? It's a hotdog, bun, fresh onions, mustard and some of Leo's famous chili. The new owners are diplomatic about challenging a Chicago icon.

"We're not muscling, we're complementing," co-owner Lou Goldhaber told CBS 2's Don Schwenneker. "I love a Chicago dog – I think it's great. We actually have one on our menu ... We're kind of merging the two cities between hot dogs."

And judging by the crowd of mostly Michiganans, the Coney in Chicago is something they've been waiting for a long time. Michael Dulberg says the two dogs are as different as night and day.

"Chicago dogs are great, but this is the Michigan dog," he said.

For others, there's no comparison between the two dogs.

The Detroit-style dog is "10 times better," Michigan native Michael McClain said. "This is amazing."

Greek salads and other Greek specialties, and breakfast items, are also on the menu.

"No longer will you have to search for that tasty Greek Salad, that perfect Chili Hot Dog, or that affordable place to dine with the whole family," the restaurant's Web site said.

But will an import from the Motor City have difficulty competing with a town so proud and protective of its hot dogs as Chicago?

"Coney Island" has its own local definition in Detroit, referring specifically to the chili-slathered hot dogs and the short-order restaurants or diners that sell them. But in Chicago, "Coney Island" has few associations other than the amusement park and beach district in Brooklyn, N.Y., where the Detroit hot dog was reputedly invented before making its way west to Motown.

Monsters & Money in the Morning co-host Mike North, himself a former hot dog vendor, says the name might cause problems in Chicago.

"When you take a New York name – 'Coney Island' – and you put it in Chicago, that's automatically a negative," North said.

Several years ago, Nathan's Famous hot dogs, a revered East Coast chain that originated at the actual Coney Island, opened a location on Rush Street in Chicago. The New York import wasn't successful, North said.

But Leo's Coney Island's location near Wrigley Field may be an asset, North said.

"I hope he makes it. He's not downtown – he's on Southport and Addison, which is on the way to Wrigley Field," North said.

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This Detroit-style dog, now available in Chicago, is slathered in chili.
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