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O.C. deli calls out Coney Island hot dog king

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In just two days, Tom "The Goose" Gilbert will leave his Las Vegas home and blast his way in a Ford Focus through the desert furnace to defend his title here in Mission Viejo.

But first he'll have to face off with Furious Pete, winging his way in from Toronto, and Dale Boone, the self-appointed Mouth of the South, en route from Georgia.



Tom "Goose" Gilbert is the defending champ of the Derby Deli's first annual hot dog eating contest last year. He will be back this Labor Day to defend his title.
COURTESY TOM GILBERT

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It's not every day that you get three of America's top competitive eaters throwing down at a West Coast contest. But then there aren't all that many West Coast contests, and the ones that are out there don't typically have dinero attached to them.

Until now.

The [Derby Deli](#) and Dueling Piano Bar is putting up \$3,000 for whoever can eat the most hotdogs in 12 minutes on Labor Day, a huge purse for California, a state that would probably ban hotdogs if it could. The largest purse in the competitive eating world is \$10,000 for the winner of the legendary [Nathan's](#) hot dog eating contest held each Fourth of July at [Coney Island](#).

Derby owner Dan Lauriano was born and bred in Fullerton, a 1984 [Sunny Hills High](#) graduate. But he has New York in his blood; his mom was born there. When he opened the Derby a little over a year ago he took all his chefs back to NYC where they hit 16 delis in four days; [Carnegie](#), [Katz's](#), [Stage](#), all the greats.

And since the Derby was going to be selling [dirty water dogs](#), dogs boiled in beef broth before they're grilled just like they do it on the push carts in New York City, they took a subway to Nathan's original on Coney Island.

"You gotta go to the Mother Ship," Lauriano says.

Having said that, he wonders aloud what all the fuss is about.

Now Lauriano is calling into question the integrity of Nathan's hallowed hot dog eating contest, a 95-year-old institution that this past summer drew 40,000 spectators and another 1.6 million viewers on ESPN.

Don't get him wrong. Lauriano loves Nathan's dogs. Sells them at the Derby, in fact.

His beef is that Nathan's cares more about sponsors and press than the contest, which is invitation only and has been dominated the last

10 years by two professional eaters who blow everyone else away: Six time winner [Takeru Kobayashi](#) (whose trophy was displayed at the Imperial Palace in Japan during his reign), and now [Joey "Jaws" Chesnut](#), who this year won his fourth title in a row by eating 54 hot dogs in 10 minutes.

"God bless you, you're a freak of nature, but you're defeating this amateur event," Lauriano says. "It's like having a basketball game in your backyard and you happen to invite Kobe Bryant to it. These guys are ridiculous. The second place guy is 12 hotdogs behind them."

Lauriano's vision is a West Coast version of Nathans, except anyone who can swallow is invited to the table.

"The pure version of what Nathan's used to be like... not hokey with the drama. A contest where anybody can have at it."

Last year 16 eaters showed up for the Derby's first West Coast Hotdog Eating Championship and the \$1,000 top prize. This year 35 have signed up. The 15 who inhale the most dogs in 12 minutes in two preliminaries tonight and Saturday night will then face off with the defending champ Monday night for the \$3,000 purse. Second place gets \$1,500.

Next year, Lauriano says, he will raise the total prize money to \$10,000. That's good news for someone like [The Goose](#), a mental health technician from Vegas who spends his contest winnings on groceries and buffets, since he can't seem to get himself invited to Nathans.

"I'm sure it's some personal reason," he says of the snub.

I asked him how he was preparing for the Derby competition.

"It's really just chewing and swallowing," he told me, sounding almost philosophical. "Everyone prepares every day when they eat."

His website says he has smashed the world records in meatballs and potato latkes. [But his hot dog intake at last year's Derby contest was 25](#), less than half of what the Nathan's champ put away this summer.

Giving The Goose a run for his money will be pro [Furious Pete](#), who doesn't sound the least bit furious but says he took his nickname because he and his friends in Canada like to say the word furious.

In a twist you couldn't make up, Pete was once hospitalized for anorexia. In 2002, the 6-foot-2 high school senior was down to 120 pounds and a half a head of lettuce a day. At the time, his mom was struggling with multiple sclerosis and his dad with depression. Pete spent time in the hospital, beat back the eating disorder, and five years later, after wolfing down four plates of breakfast to cure a hangover on a dare from friends, got the idea to go pro.

A [documentary about Pete](#), now a grad student studying engineering at McMaster University in Toronto, premiered this spring at the [Hot Docs](#) Film Festival in Toronto. Now he has groupies in Germany and more than 100 YouTube videos, including one where you can [watch him eat a pound of butter](#) in three minutes.

"It's one of the hardest things I've ever done," he says.

His biggest win was \$5,000 for downing 45 meatballs in 7 minutes in Chicago.

He can't get into Nathan's either.

"I choose not to fight it anymore," he says.

So far the only one signed up for the Derby's contest who has competed at Nathan's is [Dale "Mouth of the South" Boone](#), who wears a coonskin cap like his ancestor Daniel Boone. The 300-pound Georgian holds 32 world titles, including Reindeer sausage (28 and a half links in 10 minutes) and Russian dumplings (278 in 6 minutes).

Once called the "most hated man in professional eating," the Mouth has already informed Derby manager Patrick Reilly that he's going to send the Canadian back to Canada and cook the Goose: "These guys are not known to be hotdog eaters," he told me.

Whoever you root for, or turn away from in disgust, it should be an entertaining day at the Derby.

Watch out Nathan's.