

# Travel

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## Get back to nitty-gritty America at the Reading Terminal Market

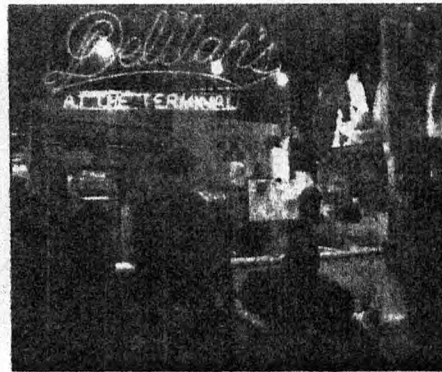
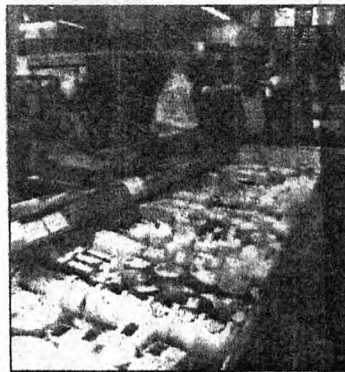
By Phil Greenvall  
Register Travel Editor

Pop into the Reading Terminal Market to get a quick bite of delicious chow, strictly homegrown, while absorbing some real, everyday flavors of the city. After all, you can't spend all your time wrapped up in ancient Egypt when you're in a great American metropolis such as Philadelphia.

It's a very busy place, right downtown at 12th Street between Arch and Filbert. You can walk right in and have fun.

Don't be surprised if you become lost or overwhelmed by the choices, though. You may fortuitously pick out a meal you won't later be second-guessing — or, you may end up walking toward an exit, see a blue neon sign and think: "Aw, phooey, There's Delilah's, where they make the best mac and cheese in America, according to Oprah. I should've waited!! Drat."

So, the place is especially great for the adventurous, snoopy and patient.



Phil Greenvall/ Register photos

The bustling Reading Terminal Market has limited the number of ready-to-eat-food vendors to 30 percent, so stalls such as one run by the Amish selling packaged cheeses, left, aren't pushed out by favorites such as Delilah's and Bassett's Ice Cream, the last original merchant.

For those who'd like the place all served up with a nice bow, that's possible, too. In this case, the bow shows off the place in a far more fascinating way than a casual visit reveals.

The bow is courtesy of Carolyn Wyman and her Taste of Philly Food Tour at the Reading Terminal Market, a 75-minute walk that begins at 10

a.m. Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Wyman — a nationally syndicated food columnist, author of several books, including "Better Than Homemade," "Spam, A Biography," and "Jello, A Biography," and former New Haven Register reporter — leads her guests around the market and gets them a few sample tastings, but more importantly

she reveals bushels of fascinating tidbits of information, not all necessarily directly related to the market.

You learn, for example, that the only link between Philadelphia and Philadelphia Cream Cheese is the name, but the city is the birthplace of the cinna-

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# Market: Reading Terminal more than lunch stop

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mon roll, bubble gum, soft pretzel, Mason jar and Automat, as well as the nation and lots of other stuff. You'll also find out that George Washington, who spent a lot of time in town, may have had a grudge against cherry trees, but loved ice cream and spend at least \$200 — lots of dough at the time, but he was rich and could afford it — on fancy ice cream molds. And that Milton Hershey flopped as a Philadelphia chocolatier before moving to the city that bears his name, on the way filching the idea for the Kiss from Philly's own confection, Wilbur Buds.

## IT'S OLD

You appreciate Reading Terminal Market more when you find out it's the oldest continuously operating farmers market in the country, with more than 100 years behind it; that it was the only one in a railroad station and that the trains actually were above the teeming street-level commerce; that every one of its 80 booths is operated by local family businesses — no national chains allowed.

Wyman, adding shots of humor, gives the history. There's the tale of the Reading Railroad president building a glorious office for himself in the new terminal building in the 1890s, and the unexpected result. She reports that, early on, here were nearly 300 daily rains upstairs and almost 500 merchants down below, but by the early 1980s the railroad was in bankruptcy, there were no more trains and only 23 merchants. When talk of demolition began, so did a save-the-terminal movement. It succeeded, with the old train shed becoming the grand hall and ballroom of the city's new convention center.

In the process, a nonprofit was set up. It leased the city-owned, street-level space at below-market rates and banned national chains in an attempt to retain the market's vitality and character.

It also put a limit on ready-to-eat foods. They can take up only 20 percent of the stands, so produce, meats, dairy, flowers and other actual farm products as well as fresh seafood still are a

big part of the trade. There also are a few book and souvenir vendors and a "beer garden."

## THE AMISH

Rejuvenation of the market saw the arrival of a contingent of the Pennsylvania Dutch. They have about a dozen stands now, but they're open Wednesdays through Saturdays only because the Amish come in from Lancaster County and the commute makes for long days.

Amish women are featured at one of the more entrancing stops on the walking tour, Fisher's, where you can watch them working dough by hand, fashioning pretzels.

Wyman talks of the origin of both the pretzel and its shape, and notes that Philadelphians so love the soft pretzel the city has 16 pretzel bakeries — all using machines since 1979. The women at Fisher's "are reviving the art," she says.

She offers insights about many vendors. Pearl's has a tale to tell about turtles, even though it's known for oysters. And how about a buttermilk stand? It's Spataro's. In fact, it's finally given up serving buttermilk, but you can still get a cream cheese and olive sandwich, harkening to the FDR era.

Bassett's Ice Cream is the sole original Reading Terminal Market merchant and is run by the fifth generation of the Bassett family, over the original marble counter. Its super-premium, high butterfat product comes in some great flavors — Irish coffee actually made with Jameson's, for example — that you can sample before making a choice. It also makes an unusual one that has roots in Colonial times, when, says Wyman, "the main way in which Philly-style vanilla was so great was that it wouldn't kill you." She fills in all the details, which involve beans.

## CHEESE STEAKS

Your health may benefit also thanks to Wyman's notes on Rick's, on the same aisle as Bassett's and probably just as caloric. Rick's is the big Philly cheese steak place in the terminal. Wyman has the lowdown on the whole Philly cheese steak scene.

The story goes that Philly cheese steaks were created in

1930 by Pat Oliveri, a hot dog vendor who, wanting a change of pace for his own lunch, asked a butcher to shave some steak thin enough to cook easily with the dogs. A customer saw Oliveri chomping this lunch, asked to try it, and the legend began. Soon, Oliveri opened his famous Pat's Philly cheese steak stand in South Philadelphia. In 1966, Joe Vento opened the competing Geno's right across the street. These famous institutions have become very popular tourist attractions, but they are a bit out of the way.

So, settle for Rick's? It might help to know, and Wyman will tell you, that Oliveri's grandson runs Rick's. She'll also explain the etiquette of ordering a Philly cheese steak, which apparently is more stringent in South Philly. And, a final bit of information: They add extra grease to the grill when cooking the steak

at Pat's and Geno's, but Rick's doesn't.

Of course, you don't have to decide between Rick's and heading to South Philly. There are alternatives, like the hoagie. Wyman claims they're delicious — though she never had raved about New Haven's equivalent, the Italian sub — and outlines the various theories of the derivation of "hoagie." She also sees the roast pork sandwich at DiNic's as an alternative, which seems to be the very popular vendor's exclusive product and shares some Philly cheese steak characteristics.

I ended up leaving without regrets, however. I got to Delilah's. Its mac and cheese is made from scratch with Gruyere and Asiago cheese, so it sure wasn't Kraft out-of-a-box. It was very tasty, in fact. But, \$4.50 for a small side-order at a takeout booth? It's just mac and cheese!