



Photograph by the author, 2017

Discovering Garbage in the Heart of Rochester

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The Garbage Plate is so iconoclastic. It shows a real devil-may-care spirit. It's muscular, bold, brash and thumbs its nose at many fine dining experiences.
—Michael Stern, *Roadfood*, 1991

At the mouth of the Genesee River, on the southern shore of Lake Ontario, sits Rochester, once a mecca of the American manufacturing industry. Here, for over a century, George Eastman Kodak dominated both the national and global camera markets; and their catchy tagline, “Kodak Moment”, entered into the common lexicon. Opposite Kodak, on the western banks of the River, Xerox transformed businesses and offices throughout the world with their revolutionary Xerox Machine. Just across the street, Bausch & Lomb, which was founded in Rochester originally selling monacles, became the country’s principal manufacturer of eye health products such as contact lenses, implants, and pharmaceuticals. These corporations had experienced immense success throughout the twentieth century, and a majority of Rochesterians were once employed at one of the three. Rochester was built by its industry—it is a gritty city at heart. Towards the end of the twentieth century, many industries began

downsizing and outsourcing their labor, and Rochester, like many rust belt cities, took the change hard. The city simply failed to keep up with the changing times, and as the industry departed, so too did the jobs.

The Garbage Plate, however, has remained an emblematic regional food, and a central element of the city’s cultural identity. A ‘plate’, as locals refer to it, is the personification of the resolute and diligent worker of Rochester. It’s nothing but brutal honesty—you know what you are getting when you order a plate in Rochester. As a 1991 *Democrat and Chronicle* article declared, the Garbage Plate is “not like the food your mama used to make. More like what Uncle Louie whipped up, standing there in front of the sludge-splattered stove in his ripped sleeveless T-shirt, back when your parents used to send you to the city for a week’s visit.” Many Rochesterians regard a young teen’s first Garbage Plate as his or her rite-of-passage into adulthood. The dish

has also survived the ongoing clean-eating trend—its notorious 3,000 calories will rarely intimidate a local. When the manufacturing industry began to stagnate, and jobs began to leave—the Garbage Plate was by no means diminished, rather it continued to expand beyond the heart of the city, following workers and citizens into the growing suburbs.

Sometimes considered comfort food, other times considered discomfoting to eat, the Garbage Plate is still largely unique to Rochester. Nearly every restaurant in the city offers their own take on the dish that has become a fundamental part of Rochester's culture. The meal is an amalgamation of common picnic foods piled into a Styrofoam take-out container or placed atop a fragile, grease-soaked paper plate.¹ Often split into three distinct layers, the base can be any combination of macaroni salad, home fries, or baked beans. The original dish instituted the beans, but today, macaroni salad tends to be the potatoes' most frequent companion. The plate's second layer is usually the customer's choice of protein: two hot dogs or two cheeseburgers are the typical selection, but other options include steak, fish, ham, grilled cheese, and even tofu. Finally, the third, and arguably the most important, layer is the meat hot sauce, which is actually more of a meaty chili packed full of spices. Raw onions and mustard ('the works'), accompany the sauce unless otherwise specified. A couple of slices of Italian bread are the finishing touches.

The origins of the Garbage Plate can be traced back to the Great Depression, when it was originally created to feed Rochester's working class at the short-order restaurant 'Hots and Potatoes', opened in 1918 by Alexander Tahou. Back then, the garbage plate was known as "Hots 'n Potats", which became renowned as a filling and hearty meal on a single plate for a cheap price. This early iteration strictly used Zweigle's hot dogs as the protein with baked beans as the second base opposite the fried potatoes. The well-known hot sauce was a Greek-style chili sauce, drawing inspiration from the owner's Greek heritage.

¹ Emily Fekete, "I Know I'm Home When I Have One: The Cultural Significance of the Garbage Plate of Rochester, NY," *Material Culture* vol. 46, no. 1 (April 2014): 30.

Nick Tahou, the eventual namesake of the restaurant, took over the establishment from his father, Alexander, in 1942, when he was twenty-two years old. Tahou emigrated from Flambouron, Greece in 1937, and learned to speak English while hawking hot dogs ('hots') in the streets around the restaurant.² Tahou's ambitious, outgoing personality and sense of humor contributed to the success he and his business would find in the coming years.



Rochester Garbage Plate
Photograph by the author, 2017

Nick Tahou's Hots saw its increased success coincide with the expanding industrialization of Rochester. The restaurant moved from its original location in 1968, finding a new home a few blocks down the road at 320 W. Main Street—the former Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Depot. Erected in 1887, the building had long operated as the final stop on the once bustling train route connecting Pittsburgh and Buffalo to Rochester. It also happened to be one of the location where, in 1937, 17-year old Nick Tahou sold his father's hot dogs. He would continue to personally sell hots here until his death in 1997.

As the restaurant settled into the new location, it became increasingly popular with the city's residents. Notorious for being open all night long, Nick's began serving a clientele different from its original working-class patrons. Tahou would see his

² Greg Livadas, "Nick Tahou dies at 77; made 'garbage' a treat," *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester, NY), Jan. 11, 1997.

regulars during the day, but a different subset of customers would dominate during the night. As Bob Minzesheimer wrote in the *Democrat and Chronicle*:

Nick Tahou's is also an informal community theater, an improvised stage where persons from different sections of Rochester entertain themselves and others. [...] It's a cross between a night-club and a greasy-spoon. It's where a scene from 'Midnight Cowboy' or 'Super Fly' would have been filmed in Rochester.³

Tahou's restaurant conformed to the changing demographic of downtown Rochester. Once set in an area surrounded by bustling factories filled with workers, Nick's was now encircled by a city in decline. Though, unlike many other proprietors, Tahou stubbornly refused to change locations—a tough decision at the time, but one that would prove fruitful in the long run.

As Nick Tahou's Hots became more of a late-night food joint, it began to attract college students as well—almost invariably after a night of heavy alcohol consumption.⁴ Tahou credits students from the University of Rochester for inspiring the name, in fact. He claimed that these students would come in and ask for a plate of hots “with extra potatoes and [...] some of that garbage.”⁵ As a testament to his sense of humor, Tahou “sensed instinctively that his patrons would enjoy the use of the term ‘Garbage Plate’ and he capitalized on the free advertising it provided him.”⁶

Aside from his scrappy business acumen, Tahou's generosity and kindness was also often praised by his patrons. One customer recalled a time when someone entered the joint and grabbed some food from the garbage can. Tahou saw this and gave

the man a free meal. Others remembered his quirky humor, as he always had a good word to say about someone or a good joke to share. It was obvious that Nick Tahou's Hots was Tahou's true home. Although he retired in 1988, and was being treated for cancer around that time, he continued to come to the restaurant every day for another nine years, up until a few months before he passed, as his son and the current owner, Alex Tahou, recalls.

Alex Tahou has successfully conveyed Nick Tahou's Hots and his father's legacy well into the twenty-first century. Savvy like his father, but certainly more sarcastic, the younger Tahou has made several key decisions which would result in greater success for the restaurant than before. The ‘Garbage Plate’ was officially trademarked in 1992—a decision made in the wake of other rival establishments beginning to sell imitations of the dish. Three years later, Nick Tahou's Hots was featured at Rochester's annual Lilac Festival. Since then, Nick's has been a veteran vendor at the yearly festival; as an editor for the *Democrat and Chronicle* noted,

If you spot a trail of slightly dazed people leaving the park - glassy-eyed, wheezing softly, hands gently folded over swollen bellies - you'll know they just met Nick.⁷

Another journalist for the *Democrat and Chronicle*, in relation to her unease about Nick's presence at the festival, commented that the Garbage Plate's appeal “loses something when eaten in broad daylight.”⁸ Nevertheless, Tahou's expansion continued when Frontier Field stadium opened its doors in 1996. Tahou jumped at the opportunity to launch his own concession stand.⁹ Though Nick's already sold food during the Rochester Rhinos soccer games in the park, the Red Wings (AAA minor league affiliate of the Minnesota Twins) initially declined part-

³ Bob Minzesheimer, “More Than Sauce Is Spicy's at Nick's,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, Oct. 22, 1973.

⁴ Barbara Isaacs, “Their presence was requested at Nick Tahou's. Home of the Garbage Plate,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, Apr. 24, 1989.

⁵ Greg Livadas, “Nick Tahou dies at 77; made ‘garbage’ a treat,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, Jan. 11, 1997.

⁶ Robert E. O'Brien, “Nick Tahou's will remain a Rochester institution,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, Jan 22, 1997.

⁷ John Reinan, “The latest additions to Lilac Festival cuisine: Nick Tahou's Garbage Plate,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, May 11, 1995.

⁸ Diane Louise Carter, “Those Lilac snacks aren't necessarily cheap; here's a guide to help you find the best,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, May 15, 1996.

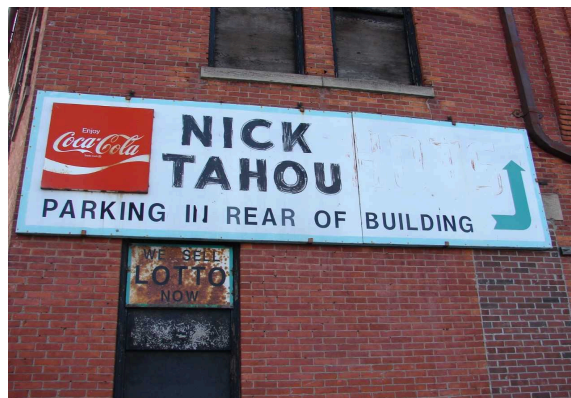
⁹ Jim Mandelaro, “No ‘Garbage Plate’ for the Red Wings,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, Feb. 25, 1997.

nership because they didn't want to lower their own hot dog sales.

Alex Tahou would not make his toughest decision until 1999, and, in a move which would be both unavoidable and the end of an era, he began to close the restaurant at midnight. This wasn't unjustified; there was simply too much late-night trouble inside and outside the restaurant. For years, police had been responding to constant fights, and the area had become known for prostitution. As my own father recalled to me, if you were stopped at the W. Main and Ford St. intersection outside Tahou's after dark, "you'd better close your windows". A State Trooper recalled a story from the early 1990s. He had gone out to eat with some of his fellow troopers, and they were not well received by the drunken customers. They didn't think much of it; however, as they were sitting down to eat their meal, they suddenly heard a loud noise coming from the parking lot. He and the other troopers quickly moved outside, guns drawn, thinking it might have been a drive-by shooting, only to find that the hood of one of their cars had been set ablaze. It now seemed that closing before midnight was necessary to keep up with the ever-changing urban atmosphere of downtown Rochester.

In 1979, Nick Tahou and his brother Ike opened up a second location on Lyell Avenue in Gates, near Rochester.¹⁰ Nick was always more focused on the original location; he allowed his niece and nephew, Steve and Joanne Tahou, to manage the new restaurant. This newer generation of Tahous preferred to draw from their roots, naming their own signature dish, 'Hots and Potatoes', as their grandfather did years prior. Steve and Joanne took full ownership in 2007 and changed the name to Steve T Hots & Potatoes. Though some had believed a family controversy might erupt over the change, the sibling owners assured them that they were doing so simply because they wished to differentiate themselves from Nick's in name and also in cuisine, by serving a style of plate a little different from the original. Later, they began bottling and selling their own Steve T hot sauce, which has a little bit more of a kick than Nick's. The second location con-

tinues to operate to this day, albeit with a smaller customer base.



Nick Tahou's Hots

Photograph by the author, 2017

The original Nick Tahou's Hots has continued to thrive at its 320 W. Main Street location, with the hours of operation now limited from 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM. Nick's remains a mainstay at the Lilac Festival each year. The environment inside the restaurant remains the same as well. Nearly every restaurant in Rochester has now produced their own take on the plate, and some may in fact taste better than Nick's. But no other restaurant can provide the full and authentic experience that comes with ordering a Garbage Plate at Nick's.

I can still distinctly remember the first time that I had a Plate at Nick Tahou's. It was in August of 2014, during the final days leading up to the start of my first semester at Syracuse University. I was accompanied by three of my close friends—two fellow veteran plate-eaters, and one rookie, Sam, who had yet to indulge himself in the heartburn specialty. We must have raised a few eyebrows when we entered, as Nick's clearly hadn't gotten as many college-aged kids as they used to—at least not during the middle of a weekday. I was astounded at the production capacity and efficiency of the place—never before had I seen so many burgers and so many hots on a single stove. The three of us experts ordered our plates swiftly, but when Sam's turn came, he faltered, he showed hesitation—the burly man working behind the counter, as we soon learned, was always quick to pounce at any sign of weakness. He mocked Sam's inexperience and even got Alex Tahou in on it. Sam eventually told the man to just give him what we were having, but the com-

¹⁰ Deborah Alexander, "Tahou's next generation gives eatery its own flavor," *Democrat and Chronicle*, Mar. 9, 2007.

edy of the encounter will be stuck in my head forever—it is just the kind of experience you won't find anywhere else in Rochester. Alex and the other cooks working there have all been doing this for decades; for them, putting plates together is second nature. It takes a maximum of 90 seconds to receive your dish at Nick's. Truly a sight to behold.

Any time that a company's product captivates consumers, it should be expected that others will attempt to recreate that product in order to reap a share of the profits. At the end of the twentieth century, other establishments in the greater Rochester area started serving their own iterations of the Plate. Vasil "Charlie" Ilijevski worked at Nick's for two decades. In 1991, he opened up Empire Hots in Webster for his daughters to run.¹¹ Their principal dish was the Trash Plate. Nick Tahou's Hots may own the Garbage Plate name, but they do not own the actual dish and cannot prevent anyone from selling it under a different name. In 2001, one of Empire Hots' co-owners, Angelo Teoharev, Ilijevski's son-in-law, claimed that they were selling nearly 3,000 Trash Plates a week. Teoharev's brother-in-law, Mario Markoska, who also worked at Empire Hots, once said that a man had ordered a plate to store in a cooler for his flight down to Florida. Because of its suburban location, Empire Hots stays open as late as 4:00 AM on weekends, without having to worry about the same troubles that once plagued Nick Tahou's Hots downtown. In fact, 80% of their sales occur late at night.¹² A sizable part of the younger generation now lived in the suburbs, and Empire Hots was poised to take full advantage. Those craving a Plate could now make a stopover at Ilijevski's place on Empire Boulevard. Ilijevski's family was at first apprehensive, thinking that Nick Tahou would have been upset with them for opening their own restaurant under a similar business model, and for selling a very similar dish. But Tahou attended the opening himself, and even brought flowers.

Other imitators began to emerge with similar names. Dan and Tom Purdev opened up Irondequoit Hots in 1994, selling the 'Hog Plate', though

they claim that it's their hot sauce, which differentiates them from other competition.¹³ In 2005, they estimated to have been selling about 400 hots or hamburgers each day. In the summer of 2000, both Fairport Hots and Penfield Hots first opened their doors. According to their website, Fairport Hots refers to their variation of the Garbage Plate as the 'Hot Plate'. Gary Brockler, founder of Penfield Hots, once owned a pizza takeout stop called Pizza Box, where he sold the 'Rubbish Plate'.¹⁴ After he had overheard some of his younger employees making plans to eat at Nick's after work, he came up with the idea to open up his own greasy spoon in the suburbs. "I thought, I bet if I started it out here, they wouldn't drive all the way downtown", remarked Brockler. His assumptions were correct; he soon was selling 200 Rubbish Plates each day during the first summer of operation. One year later, he opened up an additional 'hots establishment' in Greece named Greece Hots. A wave of new establishments quickly followed: East Rochester Hots in 2001, Henrietta Hots in 2003, Webster Hots in 2006, and Chili Hots in 2012, among a list of many others. In March of 2016, Joe Nucci opened up Spencerport Hots and sold 296 plates on the first day.¹⁵ Nucci seemed destined for success, as his grandmother and great-aunt had opened up Roncone's and Agatina's respectively, two of Rochester's most iconic Italian restaurants. Spencerport Hots became one of the first 'Hots' joints to offer online ordering. Convenience has characterized these restaurants for years, having long offered late-night delivery to complement their late-night hours.

While the aforementioned eateries were serving what is essentially the same plate in a similar environment as Nick Tahou's Hots, in 2005 Horizons at Woodcliff became one of the first restaurants to incorporate the meal into their existing menu as an upscale version of the original plate. An innovation of head chef Richard Reynolds, the 'Plat du Refuse' consisted of an elk burger with gourmet Vermont cheddar cheese, a red 'hot' made from bi-

¹¹ Kristen De Vito, "Night owls clock to eatery," *Democrat and Chronicle*, Jun. 22, 2001.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Joseph Spector, "Hot sauce makes this place a hot spot," *Democrat and Chronicle*, May 22, 2005.

¹⁴ Karen Miltner, "Penfield Hots opens with rubbish plate," *Democrat and Chronicle*, Aug. 17, 2000.

¹⁵ Tracy Schuhmacher, "Spencerport Hots off to a sizzling start," *Democrat and Chronicle*, Apr. 5, 2016.

son meat, atop a base of homemade baked beans with Applewood smoked bacon and potatoes sautéed in butter à la Lyonnaise with a macaroni salad covered with sweet roasted grape tomatoes. The finishing touch was not simply a hot sauce, but rather a “rustic, wild game chili that imparts more heft than heat.”¹⁶ This combination of gourmet ingredients, along with its French name, equated to a \$15.75 price for the meal, nearly \$10 more than Nick Tahou's Garbage Plate. The inspiration behind this move was Horizons's interest in accommodating guests who might want to try something different from standard fine dining, and to encourage out-of-town guests to give the dish a try: “We tell them it is a glorified meat platter. Once people try it, they are hooked,” said Mark Rector, the hotel's head bartender.¹⁷ Three days after the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* reported on the story, the Horizons hotel received a cease and desist letter from Tahou's lawyers, claiming trademark infringement. This may seem strange as there were dozens of other restaurants offering similar dishes and with similar names, all in a very similar environment to Nick's. It is suspected that he chose to challenge Horizons because the dish and the establishment were, in many ways, the exact opposite of Nick Tahou's Hots. The Plat du Refuse contradicted everything that Alex Tahou, Nick's father and the grandfather of the current owner (also named Alex Tahou and mentioned previously), had envisioned for the original dish all those years ago. He had wanted to pile a hearty meal onto a flimsy plate for a cheap price to feed the hard-working people of the time. What Horizons had created was, though unintended, a mockery of the iconic Rochester dish—and they have since stopped serving it.

Further adaptations of the Garbage Plate would not stop with Horizons, and neither would the trend be limited to the classic greasy spoon styled after the original Nick Tahou Hots. In 2013, Shaina Sidoti started the Effortlessly Healthy food truck; she wanted to create a food truck that could “accommodate a range of special diets, including

low-sodium, gluten-free, vegetarian, and clean eating.”¹⁸ Now with a sister cafe, Effortlessly Healthy is known for its ‘Healthy Trash Plates’, which include roasted sweet potatoes and coleslaw as the base, in place of the home fry macaroni salad combo. Instead of the meat hot sauce, Sidoti's plates are topped with her very own homemade avocado sauce. The protein choices include steak, chicken, burger, tofu, and portobello mushrooms. In 2016, they began to deliver meals. The menu includes a few pre-selected plates, along with the opportunity to “create-your-own” from a wide list of ingredients. Sidoti's success is a testament to the Garbage Plate's continuing appeal, even in a ‘clean’ form.

The greasy dish has found its way into kitchens across the country. Joe LoPresti, a Penfield native, opened up The Garbage Truck in Los Angeles in December of 2011, as a quirky food truck that services Hollywood, offering Rochester's classic dish to an entirely new demographic.¹⁹ LoPresti offers the ‘trash-a-dilla’ filled with chicken, cheese, meat hot sauce, and his own signature Garbage Truck sauce. While Rochester is all too familiar with the caloric bomb that is a Garbage Plate, one might think that Californians would not have accepted it. Surprisingly enough, LoPresti says that he has seen nothing but great success, serving the likes of Seth Rogen, Josh Groban, Ricky Williams, and Chuck Liddel, while Rochester natives who live in Los Angeles are, as expected, some of his most loyal customers.

In 2017, the Rochester Red Wings changed their name to the ‘Rochester Plates’ for a single game, donning uniforms featuring the image of a plate.²⁰ The promotion, a testament to the Garbage Plate's cultural influence on Rochester, was a massive success, and they sold fourteen variations of the plates at their concession stands. The Red Wings have recently announced that they plan to dress as the Plates during every Thursday home game of the next season. Their willingness to overcome their earlier spout with Nick's in the mid-1990s shows the Garbage Plate's great evolution over the past

¹⁶ Karen Miltner, “Upscale restaurant gives Garbage Plate a French name and voilà,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, Apr. 5, 2005.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Tracy Schuhmacher, “Effortlessly Healthy expands,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, Oct. 1, 2015.

¹⁹ Tracy Schuhmacher, “He serves ‘Trash Plates’ to the stars,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, Jan. 5, 2016.

²⁰ Leo Roth, “A Gastrointestinal Grand Slam,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, Aug. 11, 2017.

two decades as it expanded beyond Nick Tahou Hots.

There are three distinct and discernible points in the evolution of the Garbage Plate. The first was when downtown Rochester began transitioning away from its manufacturing and blue-collar core, and during which more families began to move into the suburbs nestled around the city. The downtown population therefore experienced a demographic shift; the customer base of Nick Tahou Hots began to change during this period as well. Young college students and partygoers were now coming to Nick's en masse, and the restaurant quickly became the designated late-night food joint.

The second was in 1999, when Alex Tahou finally decided to shut the restaurant down at midnight. This was the impetus for the numerous restaurants which soon sprung up serving similar versions of Nick's Plate, capitalizing on customers who could no longer visit Nick's late at night. Accessibility to the Garbage Plate had been enhanced to serve a larger part of Rochester's population. This increased exposure allowed the plate to become the major influence on Rochester's culture that it is today. Once copycats emerged, anyone could indulge themselves in a plate at a more convenient location only minutes away from their home.

The most recent stage of the Garbage Plate's evolution came about when established res-

taurants and sports organizations began incorporating the popular dish into their menus and business plan. Horizons at Woodcliff's Plat du Refuse, Winfield Grille's Garbage Plate Soup, and the Burger Bar's fried Garbage Ball are but some of the appropriations of the original Plate. These spin-offs are proof that the Garbage Plate has become a central part of Rochester's identity. Because it is so firmly rooted in our identity, we Rochesterians will consume the plate in any way that we can; it's *our thing*. Buffalo has the Bills, Syracuse has the Orange, and Rochester has the Garbage Plate. Outsiders may gawk at its calorie count or its sheer image, and that's fine—if not understandable. But for us, it's who we are, and nothing will change that. A gritty regional food originating from the mind of Nick Tahou has become the emblem of our city.

To close, the following is a limerick from the imaginative Rochesterian Chris Shaw, published in a March 3, 1996 edition of the *Democrat and Chronicle*:

*There once was a banker named Lenny
Who ate two Garbage Plates and a Genny.
The combustible mixture
Really rattled the fixtures
When he bent down to pick up a penny.*