

# SUCCESS

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*Stories*

## **STEVE'S PRINCE OF STEAKS**

Mention Philadelphia and likely Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell are some of the first things that come to mind. But perhaps nothing is more quintessentially Philadelphian than Philly cheesesteak sandwiches. And while legions of fans will argue loud and long over which of the city's thousand or more sandwich shops make their favorite, those in the know will tell you that Steve's Prince of Steaks sells the best cheesesteak around.

Pat and Harry Olivieri first served customers chopped steak on hoagie rolls from their hot dog stand in south Philadelphia back in 1930. Their unique version of a steak sandwich became so popular that they opened a restaurant on the same site specializing on the menu item and called it Pat's King of Steaks.

Fifty years after the sandwich's debut, Steve Iliescu opened his first Philly steak sandwich shop on the city's north side. Iliescu thought he could make cheesesteaks as well as anyone, so he opened a 1,300 square-foot store with twelve stools and window service for passersby. In a nod to the inventor of the sandwich, he called it Steve's Prince of Steaks. Now with three stores and fistfuls of accolades, Steve's Prince of Steaks is an established icon in Philadelphia.

Pictured left to right:  
The Prince, Steve Iliescu;  
Eliza Ann Keating, Keating of Chicago;  
Neil Inverso, Keating Sales Representative.

The original Philly steak sandwich consisted simply of thinly sliced grilled steak served on a roll. One of Pat Olivieri's managers was credited with adding Provolone cheese to the sandwich sometime in the 1940s, creating the first Philly cheesesteak. Since then cheesesteak restaurants in Philadelphia have added a number of variation on theme. The basics, however, are steak sandwiches plain (called a "steak"); with onions; with American cheese; with Cheez Whiz; with Provolone; and with mozzarella. A Philly steak sandwich with pizza sauce and mozzarella is a "pizza steak," and one made with chicken is—you guessed it—a "chicken steak."

Steve's Prince of Steaks serves them all, along with hamburgers, hot dogs, hoagies, fries and sodas. But Iliescu's restaurants get so busy on weekend nights (when they're open until 3 a.m.) that they don't bother with anything but cheesesteaks. And his cheesesteaks are so popular that he typically sells around 4,000 a week in each of his stores, accounting for nearly 90 percent of sales.

Cheesesteak with Cheez Whiz is his most popular menu item, and cheesesteak with American cheese runs a close second, according to Iliescu. His stores also sell a ton of cheese fries.

After a dozen years in business, Steve's Prince of Steaks was named "Best Cheesesteak" by Philadelphia magazine. Six years later, Steve's Prince of Steaks was one of 22 local cheesesteak shops to help the Philadelphia Eagles qualify for a Guinness World Records for "world's largest cheesesteak." When the 365-foot long sandwich was finished, Steve's Prince of Steaks was deemed "Best of the Biggest."

His success (and growing notoriety) convinced Iliescu to expand his "princedom" and open a second store in 1999. A third store followed



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in 2006, and along the way, Steve's Prince of Steaks earned additional kudos from television food shows such as "The Hungry Detective," food-oriented websites like CitySearch, and again in Philadelphia magazine. Steve's Prince of Steaks even appeared in a movie shot in Philly.

Iliescu credits his success to a number of factors, starting with the food itself. After all, you don't become the best unless people think your product tastes great.

"A lot of it has to do with the type of rib eye we buy," Iliescu says. "We buy it fresh, trim it so there's no tough cartilage, freeze it, then partially defrost it and slice it thin when we're ready to cook it. We only use sliced rib eye, not chopped steak."

Hoagie rolls are delivered fresh every day, and Steve's Prince of Steaks throws out whatever's left over, refusing to serve day-old baked goods. The restaurant used the same bakery for its rolls until a few years ago when the family-owned business sold out.



"A dough man who had worked there went to work at another bakery instead of hiring on with the new owners," Iliescu says. "I convinced him to mix the same formula for us at his new job. We're the bakery's only customer for those rolls."

What really gives him an edge, according to Iliescu, is his Keating Miraclean® griddle. "No other grill is hotter, faster, scrapes clean in minutes and has no flavor transfer," he says. "This is the only grill on the market that can recover fast enough to keep up with the traffic we get from 12:30 to 3:00 a.m. on Friday and Saturday nights."

Cheesesteak sandwiches are a favorite among young males. "It's a guy thing," Iliescu says. And some of Steve's Prince of Steaks' best customers are late-night bar-hoppers. For the last few hours they're open on Friday and Saturday nights, the stores will serve more than 180 sandwiches an hour.

"Keating's Miraclean® grill also adds tremendous appeal when customers see it through the service windows that other grills can't match," he says.

Iliescu still has the original Keating griddle he purchased for his first store in 1980, and says it's just as hot and fast as ever. Other than replacing a thermostat and a couple of gas valves, it hasn't required service, and the Miraclean® surface still looks brand new.

Iliescu also has two portable propane-fired Keating Miraclean® griddles, one four feet and the other five feet, that he uses for off-site catering. Steve's Prince of Steaks has catered corporate parties of up to 300 people for local companies like Lockheed Martin, and events like high school graduation parties.

Like all true princedoms, Steve's Prince of Steaks is a family affair. Iliescu's son Ross and daughter Abbe worked in the

Steve's Philly Cheesesteaks are cooked to order on their original Keating MIRACLEAN® Griddle.



Steve's Prince of Steaks original Philly cheesesteak and fries.

original restaurant as kids to help put themselves through school. Though they attended college with the intent of going into other fields, both gravitated back to the restaurant and offered their help. Ross helped open and now manages the second store on Comly Road in north Philadelphia, and Abbe reigns over the third store in Langhorne, Pa., just outside the city.

You can get a Philly cheesesteak in a lot of restaurants across the country. But as Iliescu says, "Don't make a mistake and be fooled by a fake; there's only one true Prince of Steaks."



"HAVE GRILL... WILL TRAVEL!" Steve's catering trailer.

Michael W. Sherer writes frequently about food and the foodservice industry.



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