

Sandwich stories

5 reasons to be thankful for sliced bread (and the people who slice it)

By Matthew Odam

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As a kid, in-between games of pool hoops or Wiffle Ball — and the madness that ensued when I, not yet the model of virtuous sportsmanship I am today, tried to bend the rules in my favor — I would sometimes make sandwiches for my friends. I wouldn't just ask if they wanted ham or turkey; I would actually take a pencil and pad and write down exactly what kind of mustard they wanted, whether they wanted their bread toasted. Pickles and onions? The attention to detail would usually make up for my sporting and temper indiscretions. At least I liked to believe it did.

Maybe it was my fondness for my grandmother's summer afternoon preparations, passed down to my mother, to which I was paying homage. Maybe I was portending a future in the service industry. Or maybe I felt guilty for acting like a brat to my friends. Whatever the reason, I always had a love for sandwiches, their quality and construction and our desires to have unique and personalized creations even in the simplest of forms.

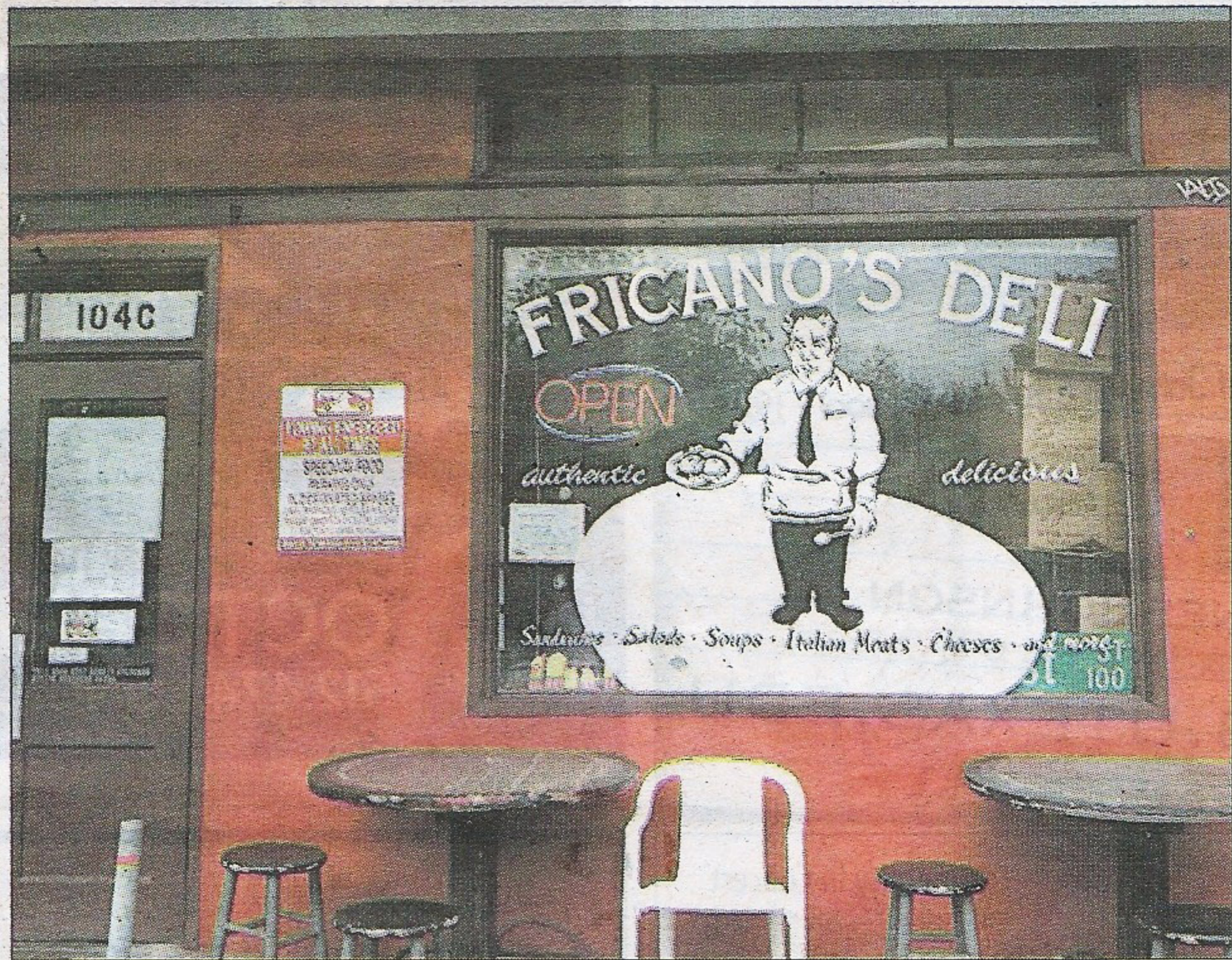
Over the years, sandwiches have been my staple, my go-to food. Sure, I love tacos ... and lobster ... and pizza. But I can't resist a wonderful sandwich. As I got older and my passion led me to find stacked pleasures across the country and abroad, I began to realize that many of these sandwiches told a story. They reflected the people making them and the places from which they came. Wagshal's in Washington, D.C., Parkway Deli in Silver Spring, Md., the Italian Store in Arlington, Va., and countless sandwich places in Italy have made me swoon and hold a special place in my heart.

In Austin, I have a healthy rotation of starters, with a steady bullpen of backups. The following are some of my favorites.

Fricano's Deli

104 E. 31st St. 482-9980, fricanosdeli.com.

A hole-in-the-wall located near the Bermuda Triangle that is the melding of East 31st Street and Speedway, Fricano's feels like a sandwich shop in a small old college town. The kind of place that, despite being open only three years, feels like it has been around forever. And it feels like the kind of sandwich shop I'd want to open. There are small shelves stuffed with books and board games, a few seats at the counter bar, seating for about a dozen people at tables for two and about two



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Fricano's Deli has been open only three years, but it has a comfortable, worn-in feel. Most of the ingredients are homemade, and the sandwiches have the right balance of fillings.

On the cover

Instead of the traditional Russian dressing, the Paul's Spicy Reuben at Fricano's Deli on East 31st Street has house-made Rocket sauce.

Mike Sutter photo

dozen sandwiches and hot dogs on the menu. If my old, imagined, pipe-tugging college literature professor — replete with patched-elbowed corduroy blazer — had a portal in his office that led to a kitchen, this would be the spot.

The sandwiches refrain from trying too hard, offering just the right number of ingredients to provide good flavor without putting on a show. Take, for example, Jamilio's Italian Cheesesteak (\$7.25). Though the only thing Italian about it is the mozzarella, the combination of Boar's Head pastrami, grilled onions and peppers, homemade Rocket sauce and the cheese on a crunchy, flaky hoagie provide a wonderful combination of savory and spicy. It comes warmed to perfection on a panini press that looks like it gets a thorough workout each day.

It might not perfectly mirror some of the

Reubens from the East Coast, but Paul's Spicy Reuben (\$6.95), my favorite on the menu thus far, benefits from the personalized touch of its creator. The bread from the local bakery Panaderia Chuy is pressed and grilled to a perfect crunch that yields to the teeth but not the touch. The sauerkraut, historically an overwhelming feature of a Reuben, is happy to play a minor role here, with the sandwich relying on the Rocket sauce (a combination of spicy mustard, regular mustard, mayonnaise, balsamic vinaigrette and Tabasco) for its mouth-puckering zest.

Longtime Austinite Paul Fricano and his business partners, the husband-and-wife team of Jamil Muhaisen and DeeAnne Bullard, take pride in their attention to detail, fresh ingredients and the fact that almost everything in the store is homemade, except the ketchup. And, really, people can be fussy about their ketchup, so it's probably safe to stick with the store-bought.

House-made offerings include potato and pasta salads, salad dressings, a red-and-green cabbage slaw, five original spreads that can be added to any sandwich and a soup of the day. Although I have yet to yield to my sweet tooth, one of these days I will give in to the allure of DeeAnne's Cupcakes, which she bakes daily.