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### Mmm, fast food that tastes like home

By Christopher Borrelli, Tribune reporter

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The names are legendary, though depending on where you live, potentially unrecognizable. The food is quick and occasionally questionable — unless, of course, you grew up eating it. In which case, again, the names are legendary. Culver's. Chicken in the Rough. Waffle House. Biscuitville. Firehouse Subs. Taco Cabana. Honey Dew Donuts. Giordano's. The world of casual-quick-serve-fast-food establishments is long and without end, an infinite array of colorful logos and cheerless teenage labor. The mix mentioned here is varied, including burgers, fried chicken, doughnuts and deep-dish pizza. Yet there is a characteristic quite specific to that random assortment: Each is considered something of a regional restaurant chain.

Which is to say, compared with vast multinational food chains, regional restaurant chains are appreciated and loved, generating a loyalty not unlike the loyalty felt for home. And like any food we connect with home, we acquire the taste early and often.

If you're traveling across country this summer, you will run into a regional restaurant chain you've never heard of, perhaps while huffing down a turnpike and noting the regional supermarket chains you've never heard of. At the fevered insistence of a local, you might even stop at a Krystal if you're in the South (Krystal being the South's answer to White Castle), or a Pei Wei in the Southwest (Pei Wei being the speedier, down-market variation of its bigger corporate daddy, P.F. Chang's).

Stop at an unfamiliar regional chain, however, and chances are you will not feel anything like the intense love that led to that recommendation in the first place. Not immediately. Some loves require time. Though if we can believe a recent survey from Sandelman & Associates, a California market research firm that specializes in the fast food industry, it's the love for regional food chains that burns hottest of all. According to Sandelman, in terms of consumer satisfaction, regional chains far outrank giants such as McDonald's — particularly regional chains that have not yet permeated the country. That's why Panera Bread, despite expanding to 1,400 locations in 40 states, remains the St. Louis Bread Co. in Missouri. It wants to retain a link with its home.

Said Sam Oches, associate editor of QSR, a trade magazine for quick, casual restaurants, the recession has only strengthened those regional bonds.

"It has required (regional chains) that could have taken themselves across the country by now, and into pretty much every area, to stay regional," he said. "But what they've discovered is that their neighborhood feel has become part of their concept. It becomes a community thing, and customers keep it as their own."

And so, although the South does not own a patent on chicken sandwiches, Chick-fil-A — in 38 states (and second only to KFC in chicken sales) — remains, somehow, a Southern tradition. Just as Five Guys Burger and Fries, which is now in 35 states, remains closely linked to its Virginia-D.C. upbringing.

That said, there are those regional chains that remain nonexistent in many corners of the country, the ones

that appear on a tree line along interstates then vanish with the next state line, leaving only burps. These, among the most beloved, operate on "the scarcity principle," Oches said. Chicken in the Rough in Michigan. Varsity in Atlanta. Walt's Roast Beef in New England. Their scarcity has become part of their appeal, the most fabled being California's In-N-Out Burger. After 60 years, it's in only four states (which routinely leads to large, pleading expansion campaigns from fans). The list here is a sampler of this last type: smallish regional favorites, locally ubiquitous, rarely seen elsewhere.

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#### Northeast

**Ted's Hot Dogs:** Eighty-year old Buffalo chain. Two states, eight locations. Try: a hot dog with hot sauce, which has a crusty, charcoal-broiled exterior.

**Del's Frozen Lemonade:** Started in Rhode Island. In 14 states. Cute roadside stands. Try: lemonade only. Slushy, contains chunks of sliced lemon throughout.

#### West

**Cafe Rio:** The best Utah-based Mexican food you can find. Weirdly addicting despite unpromising pedigree. Try: the pork barbacoa salad.

**Burgerville:** An early leader in sustainable, local-first fast-food options. Has seasonal milkshakes. In Washington and Oregon only. Try: the signature burger, with cheddar and slices of pepper bacon on a seeded bun.

**Cafe Yumm!:** Vegetarian. Quite Portland. Ten locations, only in Oregon. The thick, garbanzo-ish Yumm Sauce is so sweet and addicting locals wonder if Yumm Sauce is ... people! Try: an edamame bowl, with wisps of nori (seaweed) and a heap of Yumm Sauce.

#### Midwest

**Culver's:** Wisconsin-based burger joint, with many in Illinois. Classic upper Midwest meal (read: terrible for you). Try: a tossup between the frozen custard and the infamous ButterBurger.

**Dog n Suds Drive-In:** Charming car-hop service. Often found in sporadic, off-the-beaten-path spots. 17 locations. Try: the almost candied root beer float.

#### South

**Waffle House:** A black-and-yellow Southern staple (though with many Midwest locations). Try: the underrated hash browns.

**Whataburger:** In 10 states but very Texas. Inspires slavish devotion. Logo looks like the Van Halen insignia. Try: the namesake, with its pillowy bun.

**Biscuitville:** An institution throughout North Carolina (with a handful of Virginia locations). Try: anything simple — fried egg and ham, for instance — on a sweet, moist biscuits.

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