



# Culinary Corner

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## FEATURE



Bobby Cochran/CW photos

Crowds head to the ball game for family fun, food and more.

## Family Knight out

Good food, grand-slam fun for all ages at Knights Stadium

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Athletes in helmets and shoulder pads have begun to swarm the gridiron, but the *real* boys of summer will still assemble on the baseball diamond for weeks to come. As school vacation wanes, Knights Stadium keeps on fielding family-friendly outings with all the fun, flavor and excitement that America's national pastime has to offer.

The locally owned and operated Charlotte Knights franchise is a Triple-A affiliate of the Chicago White Sox. With more than 100 years in the Charlotte area, the team is steeped in history that includes standouts such as Cal Ripken, Eddie Murray and Curt Schilling. Seventy or more home games per season draw crowds to the team's current stadium, known as "Knights Castle." Built in 1990, the stadium is located in Fort Mill, S.C., 12 miles from Charlotte's center city.

A new stadium is on the drawing board, slated to open in uptown Charlotte in April 2009. Until then, the Castle continues to attract record-breaking crowds on game days and for special events, with as many as 15,500 attending this year's July 4 game against Durham and the Sky Show celebration that followed. Attendance topped 300,000 in the 2006 season.

With all those fans inside the stadium, someone has

to provide the eats. After all, what's a baseball game without a hot dog or two? The honor and responsibility of feeding the masses fall to Oventions Food Service.

### Covering all the bases

Oventions provides the food for every stadium venue, including seven concession stands, 22 private suites, the Home Run Café, the Kingsford Grill and the private-party picnic area. Chef Taylor Hasty is in charge of culinary operations for the café and the private suites, and Oventions subcontracts outside companies to supply products at kiosks throughout the stadium. Those vendors include Papa John's, Subway, Dippin' Dots and Jay Vending, which provides Knights fans with shaved ice, cotton candy, funnel cakes and fresh-squeezed lemonade.

Papa John's offers the company's signature personal pan pizzas. Cheese and pepperoni pizzas are made off-site, delivered to the stadium and kept hot in the kiosk. Occasionally, the supply dwindles and a wait builds for the next delivery.

The sandwiches at Subway are made fresh to order and constitute a healthier alternative to more standard ballpark fare.

My favorite of the kiosk concessions is Dippin' Dots, proclaimed by the company to be the ice cream of the future. The tiny balls of frozen flavored cream and sherbet, served in small cups or miniature Knights batting helmets, are a fun, refreshing between-inning treat.

Cotton candy and lemonade tie for a close second in my list of favorites. No matter the venue, the fluffy, freshly spun cotton candy is a hit for kids – even older ones like me; and for non-beer drinkers, the fresh-squeezed lemonade effectively quells the heat.

### Bases loaded, dogs on the grill

For more savory fare, head to the Kingsford Grill and grab some hot-off-the-coals burgers, brats and dogs. Manned by Oventions staff, the grill offers fast, friendly service and meats that always have that great char-grilled flavor. Although Kingsford serves the same fries as the concession stands, Kingsford's offerings seem hotter than the others. Next to the grill area, fans can top their selections with their favorite fixings, including mustard, sauerkraut, relish, hot sauce, tomatoes, lettuce, ketchup and more. The grill is adjacent to the Carolina Blonde Beer Garden, a popular stop for fans on the hunt for a good variety of brew. The large yellow patio umbrellas mark the spot.

Although not a novel idea, the plastic beer bottles served at the beer garden intrigued me. Because glass is a liability in any crowd, the stadium requires all beverages to be served in plastic. To that end, canned and glass-bottled beers typically are poured into plastic cups for consumers, but the plastic bottles at this stand save time and trouble and are recyclable too.

The concession stands serve a variety of fare, but you won't find the same items at each one. Mitch Terte, Oventions' general manager, explained that each stand adheres to one of two themes: smokehouse or grill. The smokehouse-themed stands feature barbecue sand-

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## BALLPARK BOOTY

Every home game at Knights Castle brings with it a fun-filled promotion. On Sundays, in addition to receiving at-the-gate giveaways, children in the stands are invited to come on the field and run the bases at the end of the game. The Knights' home game schedule and nightly promotions for August are as follows:

- Tuesday, Aug. 7, vs. Richmond; Two for Tuesday
- Wednesday, Aug. 8, vs. Richmond; VIC Card Wednesday
- Thursday, Aug. 9, vs. Richmond; One Awful Night
- Friday, Aug. 10, vs. Richmond; Free Stuff Friday – Backpacks for the first 1,500 children
- Saturday, Aug. 11, vs. Durham; Homer the Dragon bobbleheads at the gate and postgame fireworks
- Sunday, Aug. 12, vs. Durham; Bark in the Park
- Thursday, Aug. 16, vs. Louisville; Thirsty Thursday
- Friday, Aug. 17, vs. Louisville; Free Stuff Friday – Baseball bats for the first 2,000 fans
- Saturday, Aug. 18, vs. Indianapolis; Postgame fireworks
- Sunday, Aug. 19, vs. Indianapolis; Family Fun Day and Crime Stoppers Day
- Tuesday, Aug. 21, vs. Norfolk; Two for Tuesday
- Wednesday, Aug. 22, vs. Norfolk; VIC card Wednesday
- Thursday, Aug. 23, vs. Norfolk; Thirsty Thursday

wiches and nachos, while the open-air grills serve burgers, brats and fried chicken tenders. Both sell all the standards: popcorn, fries, chips, Cracker Jack, peanuts, beer and soft drinks, as well as a "Little Dragon" meal that bundles a hot dog, chips and soda for kids.

Despite the variety of fare offered at Knights Stadium, hot dogs and cold beer remain the most popular items by far. "After all, it's a ball game," said Terte.

### Nonprofits hit home run

To give back to the community, Ovations and the Knights' management team offer local nonprofit organizations the chance to operate the concession stands as a fund-raising opportunity. All participating organizations are guaranteed to raise a specific dollar amount; some make more, depending on crowd size and the volunteers' efficiency. Each group

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must provide at least 10 people to work the stand, supported by up to two experienced Ovations team managers and an Ovations runner who provides legwork.

At the season's start, Ovations trains volunteers on food safety, food prep, alcohol awareness and more. The volunteer system has a few caveats for consumers though. Generally, the burgers and dogs are fine and the chopped barbecue and nachos are good; but the wait is often long and, despite the volunteers' food-prep training, the fare is not consistently satisfactory. I was recently served an undercooked smoked chicken sandwich.

### **Take an intentional walk**

If summer's heat and the long lines at concession stands become too much to

bear, venture to the stadium's fourth floor, where the Home Run Café offers seating in air-conditioned comfort. A general admission ticket to the ball game grants access to the café, and almost every table provides a window view so diners don't miss the action on the field.

The Home Run Café offers full bar service, a sports bar-type a la carte menu Sunday through Wednesday and a themed buffet Thursday through Saturday. On Thursdays the buffet takes on a Southwestern flair; on Fridays it features steakhouse fare; and on Saturdays all-American ballpark flavors line the buffet.

While game-day seating is first-come, first-served, the café, which seats 250, can be rented for private parties and special events any time of the year.

For more information, visit [www.charlotteknights.com](http://www.charlotteknights.com). □

## Whats cookin

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To celebrate the Aug. 15 opening of its second Charlotte location, Earth Fare will throw a fund-raising party the night before, with Second Harvest Food Bank of Metrolina as the beneficiary. Proceeds from the food- and entertainment-filled evening will help Second Harvest in its mission to alleviate childhood hunger in Mecklenburg County. Admission costs \$10 at the door of SouthPark's new Earth Fare, in the Morrison shopping center at the intersection of Sharon and Colony roads. For more details on the new location or the benefit party, contact Earth Fare at 828-281-4800.



Mert's Heart and Soul in uptown Charlotte now serves takeout in packaging that is better for the environment. Formerly packed in paper bags, the takeout orders now are packaged in compostable Greenware drink cups and recyclable aluminum containers supplied by Southeastern Paper Group. Takeout orders from Mert's Heart and Soul can be placed by calling 704-342-4222 or by visiting [www.mertscharlotte.com](http://www.mertscharlotte.com).



Chefs, ready your skillets. The second annual Shrimp & Grits: The Wild Georgia Shrimp Festival, to be held Sept. 15-16 on Jekyll Island, Ga., has contests and cash prizes for the best cooks among you. The entry fee – \$30 for amateurs or \$100 for professional chefs – provides contestants with shrimp, grits, a cooktop and a festival T-shirt. Contestants must supply all other ingredients and cooking utensils necessary to create their shrimp-and-grits specialties, which will be judged on ingredients, taste, originality and presentation.

Amateur cooks can enter individually or in groups for a chance to win \$500, \$300 or \$100 by placing first, second or third, respectively. Professional chefs – those who have worked in the restaurant business for at least two years – compete in a separate class for cash prizes of \$1,000, \$800 and \$500. First-place finishers in both categories also win a two-night stay at the Jekyll Island Club Hotel.

Participation in both cook-off events is on a first-come, first-served basis with space restricted to 10 entries per class. Visit [www.jekyllisland.com/shrimbandgrits](http://www.jekyllisland.com/shrimbandgrits) for an entry form. For more information about the competition or the festival, which includes shrimp-eating contests, an antique and collectables show, live music, fireworks and more, visit [www.jekyllisland.com](http://www.jekyllisland.com) or call 877-4JEKYLL. □