

READY...

STEADY...



**MICHELLE
"CARDBOARD SHELL"
LESCO**

- Has demolished 152 chicken wings in 10 minutes.
- Uses her eating career winnings to build drinking-water wells in Africa.
- Her cupcake-munching record is 48 in six minutes.

**14TH
IN THE
WORLD**

**JULIET
"THE LOVELY"
LEE**

- Former chemistry professor turned hair salon owner.
- Has taken home \$36,115 in cash prizes.
- Competitively ate six kilos of jellied cranberry sauce in eight minutes.

**9TH
IN THE
WORLD**

**7TH
IN THE
WORLD**



EAT!

In a country considered the epicentre of the obesity epidemic – but where one in six people also go hungry each day – there’s a sport that sums up America’s conflicted food culture: competitive eating. And who are the rising stars? Women, as Naomi Chrisoulakis discovers ...

In downtown LA, hundreds of spectators are filing into a concrete plaza that is shimmering in the intense afternoon heat. On the recently constructed stage, shaded by a white marquee, sit half a dozen trestle tables, each one festooned with huge takeaway cups filled with soft drinks, iced tea and water.

Backstage, a group of women are getting ready. At one end of the roped-off competitors’ area, an athletic Asian girl with a peroxide ponytail and tiny shorts is chugging on a sports drink, as she listens to hip-hop through her headphones. At the other, a 40-something, encased in pink velour, is chatting to an excited friend, while a fifth woman, in vertiginous black heels and a dress decorated with plastic models of sushi, is texting on her phone.

The MC is whipping the crowd into a frenzy, bellowing into his microphone, “Are you ready to meet those who eat?” Nearby, a team of men and women are racing to fill dozens and dozens of plastic plates with gyoza. As the opening bars to Eminem’s “Lose Yourself” pump through the sound system, the competitors stride onto the stage. The audience scream the names of their favourites. And as they take their places, side by side, each woman turns to face their Everest: piled-high plates of pan-fried Japanese dumplings.

Today’s event – the Day-Lee Foods World Gyoza Eating Championship – is just one of the hundred or so eating competitions that take place in the US each year. At each belly-busting bout, competitors go head-to-head to vie for fame (at least within the competitive eating world) and fortune (the prize pool for some events can top \$60,000). A bit gross? Maybe. But it’s the world’s fastest-growing sport, according to organiser Major League Eating (MLE).

What was once considered a fair-ground spectacle now comes with all the trappings of a legitimate athletic endeavour. There are huge, live audiences, sponsorship deals and national TV coverage. More people tuned in to watch the sport’s flagship event – a hot dog-eating contest on the Fourth of July – than watched the ▶



**43RD
IN THE
WORLD**



MIKI SUDO

- Has eaten 3.8 kilos of kimchi (fermented cabbage) in six minutes.
- Can eat 50 Cadbury Creme Eggs in six minutes 15 seconds.
- Did nine practice sessions to prepare for this year’s Fourth of July hot dog contest, downing almost 45 hot dogs during her last 10-minute attempt.

MARY “I LOVE 'EM HOT” BOWERS

- Creates food-themed costumes for each event.
- Has competitively eaten, among other things, brain tacos and wild boar sausages.

EVAN HURD



us report

**3RD
IN THE
WORLD**

**SONYA "THE BLACK
WIDOW" THOMAS**

High-ranking competitive eaters (from far left) Matt "Megatoad" Stonie, Sonya "The Black Widow" Thomas, Patrick "Deep Dish" Bertoletti and Bob "Notorious B.O.B." Shoudt do battle with fried dumplings. Far left: Nathan's famous Fourth of July Hot Dog Eating Contest.

major league baseball game broadcast that day. Add to that the burgeoning pay packets (the sport's superstars can earn six-figure salaries and command appearance fees of \$10,000 per event) and the overall picture is less small-town entertainment than booming sporting enterprise.

But there is one key difference between competitive eating and most major athletic pursuits (and it's not just the fact that few other sportspeople usually don Hooters T-shirts and elasticised pants to compete). Here, men and women compete side by side – and, increasingly, it's the female eaters who are dominating.

This hasn't always been the case. Until a decade or so ago, women challengers were rare, and men reigned supreme. Then, in 2003, Sonya "The Black Widow" Thomas came on to the scene; weighing in at 48kg, she became a sensation when she not only took home the following year's Wing Bowl (her record: 167 chicken wings in 32 minutes), but beat a 185kg man in the process. From then on, the diminutive brunette has been an inspiration to other female competitive eaters.

Female competitive eaters like the five standing onstage in LA – alongside

- Has pocketed more than \$206,000 in winnings.
- Has eaten 564 oysters in eight minutes – which is a world record.
- In 2003, she ate 65 hard-boiled eggs in six minutes 40 seconds (then organisers ran out of eggs).
- To stay fit, she walks on a treadmill for two hours, five days a week.

a rib-eating contest earlier this year. Sudo, who lives in Las Vegas, burst onto the pro scene in April and, just last August, broke the world kimchi record – eating an incredible 3.8kg of the Korean fermented cabbage delicacy in six minutes.

Tiny and blonde with long false eyelashes, Sudo is an events coordinator who was first introduced to the sport a year ago through one of her local restaurants. "I heard about a challenge: eat 12 pounds [5.4kg] of Vietnamese noodle soup, and win a \$1500 jackpot," she recalls. "I did it ... Then I thought to myself, "Wait, I can eat while having fun and make some money out of this? Let's do more of these!"

"Miki is a surprisingly powerful eater whose greatest asset is that she wants to win beyond anything else, and it drives a lot of the men crazy," says MLE co-founder George Shea. "When a tiny woman beats a big huge guy, it makes a bit of a mockery of them. They don't want to be the one who lost to a tiny woman."

Sudo admits she trains hard to remain on form. She spends her evenings improving her technique (yes, there is technique involved), and submits to a preparation regimen that involves a stopwatch and terrifying amounts of food. When she's not eating, she's working out. "I like to go in fit, to feel lean and at my healthiest," reveals Sudo. "And I switch over to a liquid diet the day before – you want your digestive tract to be clear."

It's a routine that the 163cm-tall, 52kg Michelle Lesco knows only too well. The 27-year-old youth worker from Arizona devotes her evenings to practice sessions that involve dozens of frankfurters, dumplings, ribs – or whatever particular category Lesco has set her sights on conquering.

"[The training sessions] really suck," she admits, laughing. "Being alone in a house and eating hot dogs for 10 minutes? You get into the first minute and you're like, 'This is the worst idea I've ever had.'"

Currently ranked 14th in the world, and having won nearly \$12,000 in prize money, Lesco started out in the sport after a friend watched her devour a 1.5kg burger and dared her to test her skills against the pros. Today, she is determined to dominate the field. "When I started three years ago, I said I'd never practice. That's just a weird threshold that I didn't think I would ever cross. Now here I am, practicing for every competition."

Lesco also runs up to eight kilometres, five days a week, but maintains she's not really conscious of her diet between competitions.

"Post-contest, I tend to carry a few extra pounds. I'm OK with that." ►

"I LIKE TO GO IN FIT. I SWITCH TO A LIQUID DIET THE DAY BEFORE – YOU WANT YOUR DIGESTIVE TRACT TO BE CLEAR" COMPETITIVE EATER MIKI SUDO

a clutch of men – who are all currently eyeing the mountains of gyoza in front of them and waiting for the starting bell. Today, the prizes on offer include \$6000 and return flights to Japan – and the women stand a good chance of winning them. At the Fourth of July competition, two of the top six contestants were women.

Today, 27-year-old Miki Sudo is looking forward to once again facing off against world number one Joey "Jaws" Chestnut – having beaten him at

Since then, Sudo has climbed the ranks of professional eaters and is now number seven in the world, having won more than \$20,000 in prize money along the way. She is now recognised in the street by fans who snap photos on their phones and ask for autographs. "The other day I was grocery shopping, and a woman just screamed from across the fruit aisle: 'Stop! Are you the girl who ate the wings?!'" laughs Sudo.

Others in the industry have struggled to come to terms with her success.

MEREDITH "THE DEEP-FRIED DIVA" BOXBERGER

25TH
IN THE
WORLD

- Entering an eating competition was entry three on her bucket list – the rest is (deep-fried) history.
- Like pancakes? She can put away 23.5 in 10 minutes.
- Holds the Canadian hot dog-eating record: 21.5 in 10 minutes.



Lesco has written on her blog: "My metabolism is pretty killer, plus, I poop a lot ... No, you don't understand – I mean *a lot*."

Mary "I Love 'Em Hot" Bowers (ranked 43rd in the world), a part-time model and project manager from California, creates themed costumes for each of her contests. She also blogs about her exploits, writes recipes, and hopes to one day produce a calendar, which will reflect her passion for food. In between bouts, she maintains her figure by following what she calls a "conscious diet". "After a competition, something simple and healthy like a salad or shake is really good," she says.

Like Sudo and Lesco, Bowers entered the world of competitive eating on a whim, but is staying because of the platform it gives her to encourage other women to challenge themselves in male-dominated arenas.

"Once after a contest, I had a woman come over with her young child," she remembers. "She looked at her daughter and said, 'I'd like you to meet this woman because she's very brave and very strong', and this little girl looked up at me and said: 'That means I can be whatever I want to be. It doesn't matter if I'm the only girl.'" It was, she says shiny eyed, "an epiphany" that made her want to continue.

But not everyone's a fan, with the sport's critics vehemently arguing it sends a dangerous message. "Nothing could be more wrong, as a country in the state we're in regarding our health, than to hold eating contests," says dietitian Joseph Gonzalez from the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. "It just sends a bad message when there are a lot of concerns for food availability in a lot of countries, and even in America, there are plenty of people who don't get enough food."

Not only that, the sport poses physical risks for competitors. Gonzalez

points to raised cholesterol levels as an immediate by-product of binge eating, and while there's little research on competitive eating, "the potential for health problems is very high".

Today, the female competitors seem fit and healthy now, but they admit they don't feel great after their events. "It's an unpleasant aftermath because, as you can imagine, you have [kilograms] of very salty food [in your stomach]," says Sudo. "I get really sleepy, and I'm kind of uncomfortable for a day." Surprisingly, none of them seems to suffer from "reversals of fortune" – as it's known in the competitive eating world – i.e. vomiting.

The organisers don't believe the physical side effects are a problem. "Clearly, if the schedule was like basketball, where the athletes compete

there I was hooked, and I joined Facebook just so I could follow the eaters and find out where they were appearing." Kitchenmaster tries to attend as many competitions and challenges as she can, and has her favourites – Matt "Megatoad" Stonie is "so sweet", while Jason "Crazy Legs" Conti is "so fun". Later, she will loiter near the stage, pen in hand, chatting to the competitors eagerly as they sign paper plates for her.

"Eat!" screams the MC, and the audience roars with excitement. Lesco shovels in two dumplings at a time with her head down, glancing quickly at Sudo, who's near her. She's throwing her head back, then wiping her mouth on her shoulder, a much practiced and precisely choreographed technique. Lesco bounces up and down on the balls of her feet rhythmically while

"IN ALL OF THE EVENTS WE DO, WE PROBABLY CONSUME LESS THAN WHAT A SINGLE GROCERY STORE THROWS AWAY IN A DAY" EVENT ORGANISER

constantly, it would be unhealthy," says Shea. "It's certainly not every single weekend." Shea also dismisses the moral argument. "In all of the events that we do year round, we probably consume less than what a single grocery store throws away in a day. But the emotion behind the criticism is very valid, so we donate services and money to food charities and food banks."

Back in the plaza in LA, everyone's waiting for the countdown to begin, and few people seem distracted by the moral questions posed by their sport. As the clock ticks down, Sudo stretches out her neck as Chestnut massages his famous jaw.

Down in the crowd, Christine Kitchenmaster, 52, is just one of the fans who have turned up to watch their favourite eaters ... well, eat. With eyes shining, the marketing executive describes how she was channel-surfing on July 4, 2005, when she first came across competitive eating. "The hot dog-eating competition was about to start ... it was just so funny and exciting, I got completely caught up in it. From

she shoves handfuls of squashed gyoza into her mouth. Cheeks bulge and French-tipped fingernails disappear between lips as ponytails bob and plates of dumplings disappear. Lesco tries dunking the gyoza in water as Bowers looks like she's about to cry or vomit – or both. The clock hits nine minutes as Lesco clutches her stomach and raises her eyes to the cloudless sky. And then, it's all over as the 10-minute buzzer sounds.

Paper towels are held up to distended cheeks, eyes water, and the competitors look exhausted as they watch their plates being tallied. Sudo has managed 204 gyoza in 10 minutes, placing her third ahead of at least 10 men, who look a little shame-faced, and 64 dumplings behind the winner, 21-year-old Stonie. "I wish my number had been higher," says Sudo, sweating. "But I'm pretty happy for my first year. Anyway, I'll be back." ■

In the time it took you to read this story, Miki Sudo could have eaten 109 hard-boiled eggs.