

Food & Drink

# 'Heated Rivalry' has San Francisco ravenous for tuna melt sandwiches

HBO's gay hockey show is turning people on to the chicken of the sea.



A decidedly unsexy sandwich is a major plot device in HBO's ultra-sexy "Heated Rivalry," starring Connor Storrie and Hudson Williams. | Harold Feng/Getty Images

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By **Astrid Kane**  
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"You want to make me a tuna melt?"

With that simple, almost incredulous question, HBO's steamy gay hockey show "Heated Rivalry" reignited America's dormant love for a once-humble lunch classic. Without revealing any spoilers, it's a crucial plot point: The smoldering tension between rival players Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander hinges on the offer of a decidedly unsexy sandwich (that doesn't even appear onscreen).

According to three local restaurant owners, the city isn't merely in the grips of [gay hockey fever](#). San Franciscans — in particular, the show's strong [gay fan base](#) — are also melting for tuna. Maurice Darwish, owner of [The Cove on Castro](#), which has a large LGBTQ+ clientele, has noticed a rise in the sandwich's popularity in just the past few weeks. "We went from one a day to three or four," he says of the restaurant's version, made with Swiss cheese and rye.

On the one-to-10 scale of aphrodisiac foods, if oysters are eight and dark chocolate is 10, then the tuna melt probably ranks somewhere in the two range, slightly above wheatgrass juice and aspic. Yet "Heated Rivalry" is a very sexual show, with far more lovemaking than hockey. It has also proved to be a cultural juggernaut, vaulting stars Connor Storrie and Hudson Williams to superstardom on the strength of their sexual chemistry — including one tender scene in which Storrie's cocky character, Ilya Rozanov, makes a postcoital toastie for his love interest, Williams' more subdued Shane Hollander.



Ho-hum diner menu staple, or sexually charged delight? | Morgan Ellis/The Standard

But a tuna melt? Really? Typically comprising tuna salad, tomatoes, and cheese on toasted bread, it feels more like a budget-conscious relic of the Great Depression than a vehicle for homoerotic hijinks. It isn't even the show's most prominent food. (That title would go to ginger ale, the beverage of choice for the closeted, health-conscious Hollander.)

But the tuna melt scene — which is also a prominent passage in the novel from which "Heated Rivalry" was adapted — comes as the main characters' relationship reaches an inflection point. They are no longer archrivals who have occasional, cinematically lit sex. They have become bona fide lovers who break bread after they bang.

Over in Alamo Square, Ryan Chinchilla of [Lucinda's Deli](#) says a [TikTok video](#) last fall highlighted his tuna melt as one of San Francisco's best sandwiches. But "Heated Rivalry" added to the momentum. It's now one of the top-selling items on the menu. "People are coming around on the tuna melt, now that it's on the hottest show in America," he says.

Lucinda's is selling 30 to 35 tuna melts per day, using increasingly larger batches of tuna salad. Every day, his staff produces enough for 60 sandwiches. "By day three, we're out," Chinchilla says. "For a place of our size, that's a lot."

Raoni Washburn, manager of the Mission's 108-year-old St. Francis Fountain, started noticing an uptick in tuna melts in November — the same month "Heated Rivalry" debuted. "The owner and I were like, 'What is happening? This is so bizarre!'" Washburn says. "Before, we would go full days without [selling] one, and now we're at 16 or 17 a day."

This newfound popularity got their tuna melt out of the sin bin just in time. "We were considering taking it off the menu," Washburn says.

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