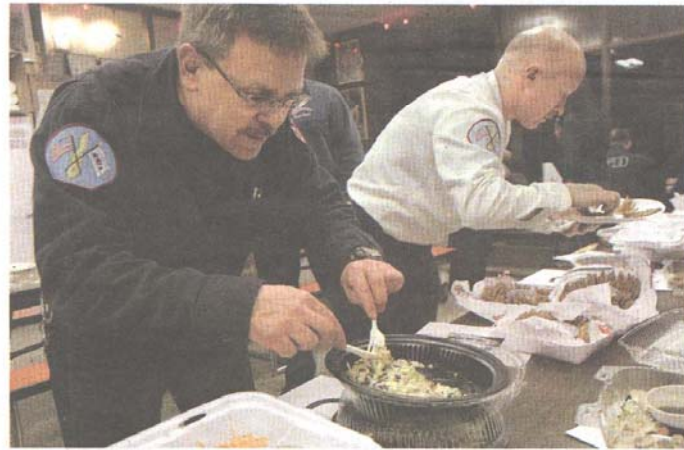




Super Bowl OF appetizers

As the Bears faithful descend upon Miami on Sunday, most of us will likely descend upon our couches, planted in front of the TV with a cold one in hand.

In the other hand? We're guessing it'll be appetizers, those ubiquitous finger foods that are the yin to beer's yang. But with so many options out there, which restaurant deserves to wear the championship ring? The Tribune organized a showdown: They got takeout from four restaurants known for their appetizers—T.G.I. Friday's, Bennigan's Grill & Tavern, Houlihan's and Chili's—and ordered four menu items from each location. With help from the crew of Chicago Fire Department's Engine 42, Truck 3, the Tribune spent one recent Sunday at the firehouse watching Bears playoff football—and eating a lot of appetizers. [TRIBUNE]



Firefighters Dan Sedory (left) and Lt. Harold Turrentine of Engine 42, Truck 3 get ready to weigh in on the appetizers. [JOSÉ M. OSORIO/TRIBUNE PHOTOS]

WINGS

FIRST QUARTER

T.G.I. Friday's	Wicked Wings (\$7.99)
Bennigan's	Buffalo Wings (\$7.99)
Houlihan's	Buffalo Wings (\$8.99)
Chili's	Wings Over Buffalo (\$8.49)

Play by play: This is a tough one to forecast. Four restaurants, four similarly prepared wings slathered with hot sauce, four sides of celery and four dipping sauces. Bennigan's gets a flag at the line of scrimmage for oversauced wings that are too hot and vinegary. Houlihan's gets a flag for being too plain and ho-hum. It's neck and neck between Friday's and Chili's. "[Friday's wings] has an interesting taste to it," firefighter Dan Sedory said. "The sauce has the best balance of spiciness."

TOUCHDOWN: FRIDAY'S



SOUTH OF THE BORDER

SECOND QUARTER

T.G.I. Friday's	Tostado Nachos (\$8.49)
Bennigan's	Southwest Egg Rolls (\$7.99)
Houlihan's	Blackened Chicken & Caramelized Onion Quesadilla (\$8.99)
Chili's	Southwestern Eggrolls (\$7.49)

Play by play: Houlihan's Blackened Chicken & Caramelized Onion Quesadilla is paramedic Eric Griswold's MVP—most valuable plate. Friday's Tostado Nachos (beans, meat, thick cheese on crisp tortilla) doesn't hold up well with time, but still squeaks into second place. The battle for third is evenly matched—Chili's Southwestern Eggrolls and Bennigan's Southwest Egg Rolls both feature chicken, black beans, Monterey Jack cheese, corn, red peppers and spinach. After bringing out the chains, it's Bennigan's by inches for third place.

TOUCHDOWN: HOULIHAN'S



FRIED VEGETABLES

THIRD QUARTER

T.G.I. Friday's	Crispy Green Bean Fries (\$5.99)
Bennigan's	Original Bacon & Cheese Potato Skins (\$7.99)
Houlihan's	'Shrooms (\$8.99)
Chili's	Awesome Blossom (\$7.99)

Play by play: Friday's Crispy Green Bean Fries with cucumber-wasabi ranch hold up as well as the Bears defensive line. "It's something a little different," firefighter Dan Sedory said. "And I like the sauce with it." But barreling down the field are Houlihan's trademark 'Shrooms—jumbo mushroom caps stuffed with rich garlicky cream cheese, then breaded and deep-fried. Left in the backfield are Bennigan's potato skins and Chili's Awesome Blossom, though Chili's seasoned dipping sauce is like the Bears' Robbie Gould—it's got a good kick to it.

TOUCHDOWN: FRIDAY'S



INTERNATIONAL

FOURTH QUARTER

T.G.I. Friday's	Zen Chicken Pot Stickers (\$6.99)
Bennigan's	Caribbean Crab Cakes (\$8.99)
Houlihan's	Tuna Wontons (\$8.99)
Chili's	Lettuce Wrap (\$8.49)

Play by play: Chili's Chicken Lettuce Wrap with sesame-ginger and peanut sauce is unique, for sure, but it doesn't work well with a cold brew in your other hand. Friday's Zen Chicken Pot Stickers gets a holding call with their rubbery exteriors and flat-tasting filling. The clutch play comes from Houlihan's Tuna Wontons. The seared rare tuna in wonton wrapper arrives with sweet soy and wasabi mayo, with a napa cabbage coleslaw. Most popular is Bennigan's Caribbean Crab Cakes, dusted with jerk seasoning and a pineapple dipping sauce. Said Lt. Harold Turrentine: "It's very good. I could eat a few of those."

TOUCHDOWN: BENNIGAN'S



THE SCORES

RESTAURANT	1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	TOT
T.G.I. Friday's	6	3	6	2	17
Bennigan's	2	2	1	6	11
Houlihan's	1	6	3	3	13
Chili's	3	1	2	1	7

THE RULES

>> From each restaurant, we order one menu item in each of four categories: wings, south of the border, fried vegetables and international.

>> Judges taste all four items within each category and rank items from favorite to least favorite.



MORE ONLINE

Check the restaurant's Web site for takeout details and your nearest location.

- >> tgifridays.com
- >> chilis.com
- >> bennigans.com
- >> houlihans.com

>> After rankings are tabulated and averaged, the restaurant with the top score in the category receives a **touchdown (6 points)**. Second place receives a **field goal (3 points)**, third place receives a **safety (2 points)**, fourth place receives a **point after touchdown (1 point)**.

>> At the end of the competition, the restaurant with the highest point total is crowned 2007 Super Bowl of Appetizers Champion.

Thursday
February 1, 2007

RED
EYE