

The Insatiable Black Widow

Alexandria's Sonya "The Black Widow" Thomas is one of the world's leading competitive eaters despite weighing just over 100 pounds. But is eating 11 pounds of cheesecake in one sitting a recipe for disaster?

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVE SEMINARA



Sonya "The Black Widow" Thomas had just devoured 183 chicken wings in 12 minutes, easily besting Joey Chestnut, the world's No. 1-ranked competitive eater, and a host of large men on a small stage at the National Wing Eating Contest in Buffalo. But she wasn't full.

"I could have eaten more," she says, more matter-of-fact than boastful. "I wasn't that full—it was only 6.43 pounds of chicken and two bottles of water. As a competitive eater, you have to have [a] stomach capacity of over 20 pounds. Oh shit, I could have eaten 50-60 more, at least—I think I could eat about 250-300 wings if I only had more time."

Sonya Thomas is insatiable. The 105-pound Korean immigrant's eating resume is, for lack of a better phrase, hard to swallow. She claims to hold 38 world records, many of which seem inconceivable even for a giant, let alone a petite 44-year-old woman: 53 soft tacos in 12 minutes, 250 "feel-the-heat" jalapenos in nine minutes, 11 pounds of





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cheesecake in nine minutes, 44 Maine lobsters in 12 minutes, 552 oysters in 10 minutes, 18 pounds of grits ... The list goes on and on and on, but in recalling these feats of gluttony, Thomas has but one regret.

“The jalapeños,” she says, laughing. “My stomach was going crazy after that. Two hours I spent in the bathroom, at least.”

When asked if she retreats to a bathroom to vomit after her competitions, Thomas looks to be deeply offended.

“People are always asking me that,” she says. “Not at all. If you can’t handle that amount of food, you shouldn’t be competing.”

But surely she must adhere to a strict, healthy diet when she isn’t competing in order to maintain her weight? Not so much. Thomas has been a manager at the Andrew’s Air Force Base Burger King for the last 14 years. Five days per week she has the same eating routine.

“I’m very busy; usually there is time for just one meal a day around 3 or 4 o’clock,” she says. “Sixteen-piece nuggets, grilled chicken sandwich, two large fries and three diet cokes. But if I’m hungry, sometimes I get a chicken salad, too.”

HUNGRY FROM THE BEGINNING

If she’s hungry? Sonya has been hungry for as long as she can remember. Born Lee Sun-Kyung in 1967 in Gunsan, South Korea, a port city of about 300,000 on the Yellow Sea that is home to the Kunsan U.S. Air Force Base, the young woman who later changed her name to Sonya Thomas upon emigrating to the U.S. in 1996, had a ferocious appetite from a young age.

Her mother was a maid, and her father was a carpenter, but both worked irregularly. Providing for their four children would have been a tribula-

tion under ordinary circumstances, but feeding ravenous Sonya was an expensive endeavor.

“Growing up, we had no money,” she says. “In the ‘70s we were so poor, we didn’t have much food. My parents didn’t have the money to buy rice, so they’d buy barley, because it’s much cheaper, or we’d just eat noodles—I got so sick of eating noodles, and I wanted something else.”

Thomas says that she worked her way through college, eventually obtaining a degree in hotel management. She worked as a typist for a shipping company and, after growing frustrated with her lack of career prospects at home, emigrated to the U.S. at age 29. She found the Burger King job and has worked there ever since.

She had no immediate relatives in the U.S. but found a way to emigrate nonetheless. When asked how this was possible, Thomas demurs, immediately changing the subject. Did she marry an American with the surname Thomas?

“Let’s talk about something else,” she says.

Thomas says that she’s single and doesn’t want to discuss the past.

EATING AS SPORT

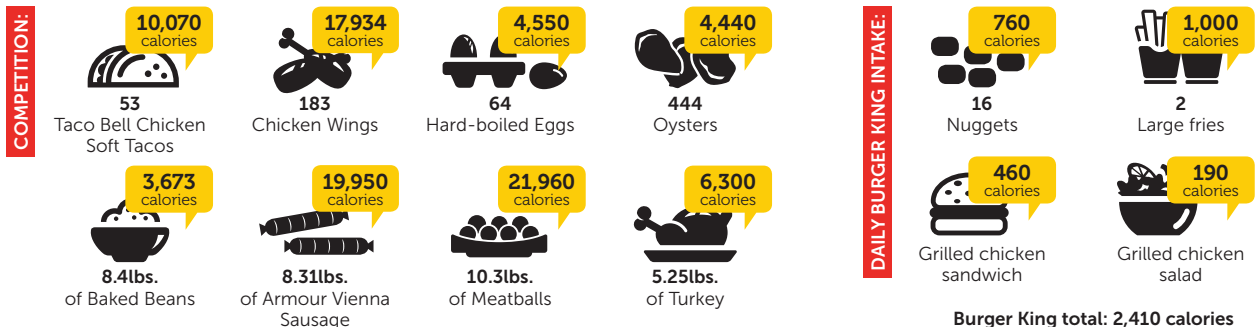
Thomas says that she knew she had a talent for eating but never thought about competing in an eating contest until she saw Takeru Kobayashi, a 5’8”, 125-pound Japanese man eat 50 hot dogs at the Nathan’s Famous annual hot dog eating contest in 2001.

According to Jason Fagone, the author of “Horsemen of the Esophagus—Competitive Eating and the Big Fat American Dream,” Kobayashi’s feat was a watershed moment for competitive eating as a sport.

“When Kobayashi came to America and ate 50 hot dogs at Nathans, that was the moment where

Counting Sonya’s Calories

According to the Mayo Clinic’s calorie calculator, an active female with Sonya’s age, height and weight should consume approximately 1,700 calories per day. When Sonya competes her caloric intake can range from 4,440 (444 oysters) to 19,950 (8.31 pounds of sausage) and beyond. Her typical, once-a-day meal at Burger King is about 2,410 calories.



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the sport shifted from this low-key celebration to something more intense and more like a sport," he says.

Fagone says that before Kobayashi, eating contests were, for decades, part of 4th of July festivities and other holiday celebrations.

"You'd have events like pie eating contests and then someone would read the Declaration of Independence, so they were sort of tied up in a celebration of America," he says. "The phenomenon of a professional eating league is much more recent, and that dates to the '70s when some publicity guys for Nathan's Famous decided to hold a hot dog eating contest to promote their brand."

The very first Nathan's hot dog eating competition is said to have been contested by four immigrants on the 4th of July 1916, in order to settle an argument over who was the most patriotic. The winner reportedly ate 13 hot dogs in 12 minutes. Nathan's held variations on the contest in '72 and '74, but it didn't become an annual event until 1978, when Walter Paul won the competition by downing 17 dogs.

Before Kobayashi, the contest was largely the domain of big men like Frank "Large" Dellarosa and Ed Krachie, an engineer who weighed more than 350 pounds. No one had ever eaten more than 25 dogs.

When Thomas saw Kobayashi, who was about her same weight, double the existing record, she knew she wanted to give it a try. Two years later, she entered a qualifying event for Nathan's at the Molly Pitcher rest stop on the New Jersey Turnpike and won the event, thereby qualifying for the Nathan's contest. In her first try, she set a new women's record, devouring 25 hot dogs in 12 minutes; the following year she broke her own record by eating 32; in 2005, she ate 37, and in 2009, she set the current women's record at 41 dogs and buns in 10 minutes.

Last year, Nathan's offered equal prize money to women for the first time, and Thomas won \$10,000, her biggest payday ever, by winning the women's division with a total of 40 hot



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dogs eaten. But she said that she came home with very little money after paying her own way to New York and covering her own expenses for a week.

Thomas competes in eating competitions around the country, sponsored by Major League Eating, which was founded in 1997 by two brothers, George and Richard Shea, who also handle PR for the Nathan's contest. But she has to pay her own travel expenses, so before entering a contest, she has to calculate if it's worth her time. In October, she entered a chicken wing eating contest in Jacksonville, Ark., only because she was confident she would win.

"The first prize was \$1,500, but the flight cost \$400 and the hotel was almost \$100, so there's pressure, you have to win; otherwise you lose money," Thomas explains.

SHE DIDN'T CARE FOR THE CHILI

The Taste of D.C. Ben's Chili Bowl World Chili Eating Championships the following week present a stiffer challenge, as

four of Major League Eating's top-five-ranked eaters turn up to compete for a total purse of \$3,000. Backstage prior to the event, Chestnut, 28, who is 6' tall and weighs just over 200 pounds, speaks about avenging his earlier loss to Sonya in the chicken wing event.

"She's an absolute animal when it comes to chicken wings," he says. "But this contest is pure capacity eating; there are no bones to handle, so I'm going to repay her today."

Thomas, who ranks 4th overall and 1st for women in Major League Eating's rankings, has nimble hands and first-rate hand-mouth coordination, and excels in events involving foods that require a little work. And Chestnut doesn't like seafood, whereas Sonya lives for the stuff.

A television reporter asks Thomas to explain her nickname as she paces nervously backstage prior to the event.

"The Black Widow is a female spider that has poison, and they kill all the male spiders; that's why they call it the black widow," she says. "I com-

pete with the men, and I want to kill the men!”

Thomas admits that she’s barely eaten a morsel of food in about 48 hours; Chestnut said that he fasted for more than 60 hours and was “pretty damn hungry.” His last meal?

“Um, chili,” he says, laughing.

When asked what her game plan is for the contest, Thomas reveals her very straightforward strategy for winning.

“You have to scoop, scoop, scoop,” she says. “There is no time to chew.”

She begins to describe the frequency of her bowel movements after eating gallons of chili, and two squeamish bystanders grimace and walk away.

The ominous bell-gonging intro to AC/DC’s “Hell’s Bells” blares out towards the assembled crowd, as Sam Barclay, the event’s straw hat-wearing emcee, launches into a foreboding introduction for Thomas.

She is the black widow, the one who goes on after the death of another. She is the absence of light. The cold breath drawn in the dead of night. And when the red sliver arrives on the horizon of dawn, she is forced ever-westward into the shadows, where she plots her next kill.

After a dramatic pause, Barclay continues, as the song builds slowly toward a frenzy.

On Labor Day she won her fifth consecutive chicken wing title in Buffalo, N.Y. She is the reigning women’s hot dog eating champion of the world. She is the meatball, jambalaya, fruitcake, cheesecake, toasted ravioli, quesadilla eating champion of the world. Alexandria, Va., 5’3”, 100 pounds, Sonya “The Black Widow” Thomas!

The crowd goes wild as Thomas bounds onto the stage, raises her slender arms above her head and salutes her supporters. She takes her place in the middle of the stage. “Notorious B.O.B.” Shoudt, a 285-pound character who strode onto the stage with a comically oversized rapper’s necklace bearing his nickname, sits on her left. Chestnut occupies her right. On the table before her sits six lukewarm 32-ounce bowls of Ben’s chili, along with a bottle of water.

As Barclay counts down from 10, Thomas grabs her oversized spoon, more like a shovel, and begins to stir her first bowl of chili. The instant that Barclay utters the magic word, “eat,” Thomas, who stands crouched over, with her face just inches from the bowl resting in her left hand, begins to shovel massive piles of chili into her mouth. She devours a huge spoonful literally every second; and the spoon, her face, and the bowl are all lost in a blur of frenzied eating.

Thomas finishes her first bowl in just 33 sec-

onds, but Chestnut needs just 26. It is immediately apparent that this isn’t going to be her day. With just 30 seconds left in the six-minute competition, Barclay cries out, “These are the most incredible athletes in the world!” as Thomas, whose face is half-covered in chili slop, labors through her fifth and final bowl of chili.

After cleaning up, Thomas learns that she consumed “only” 1.25 gallons of chili, good for 4th place, while Chestnut, the winner, inhaled two gallons worth, a new world record.

A crestfallen Thomas tells me after the event that she didn’t like the taste of the chili. It’s nearly 2 p.m., and I ask if she still plans to eat dinner.

“Yeah, I’ll still have dinner,” she says. “I just ate chili, so I want something else.”

She has some Taste of D.C. food tickets and has no intention of letting them go to waste. Thomas feels as though she’s let her hometown fans down, but the loss doesn’t diminish her appetite for competition. Two weeks later she devours 130 shrimp wontons to win a contest in Singapore, and on Thanksgiving she wolfs down more than five pounds of turkey to beat a 400-pound train conductor and a host of others in an eating competition in Times Square. In February she swallows 8.6 pounds of cake in Atlantic City, and 231 shrimp wontons in Thailand to beat her own personal mark. The Black Widow was back.

THE DARK SIDE

Thomas clearly enjoys what she does, but is there something wrong with making gluttony a competitive public spectacle? How does Thomas maintain her weight, and what kind of damage is she doing to her health? According to Dr. Lewis Korman, a local gastroenterologist, Thomas’s body may not actually be absorbing many of the calories she ingests during eating contests.

“You would think she’d weigh 350 pounds,” he says. “But all this food she eats is flying through her digestive system so quickly that she may not be absorbing a significant amount.”

Nonetheless, Thomas’s diet doesn’t come recommended by anyone.

“You don’t have to be a gastroenterologist to figure out that she doesn’t have an ideal diet,” Dr. Korman says. “Put 11 pounds of cheesecake in a plastic bag and imagine that in the stomach. ... If she keeps eating like this and ignoring the impact, it could accelerate a lot of irreversible phenomenon like diabetes, fatty liver and the like.”

Thomas insists that her exercise regimen negates the impact of the gorging. “And besides,” she says. “It’s just food. It’s not gonna kill you.” 🐾

SONYA'S TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

July 4

Nathan’s Famous Fourth of July Hot Dog Eating Contest, Coney Island, N.Y.

September

Buffalo Buffet Bowl, Buffalo, N.Y.

September

U.S. National Buffalo Wing Eating Championship, Buffalo, N.Y.

October

Jacksonville Wing-Ding Festival Wing Eating Competition, Jacksonville, Ark.

October

Taste of D.C. Ben’s Chili Bowl World Chili Eating Championship, Washington, D.C.

November

Wild Turkey 81 Eating Championship, New York, N.Y.

Note: Major League Eating hasn’t announced the rest of this season’s schedule past May, so this is only a tentative list. Be sure to check out the MLE website or follow them on Twitter for updates on future contests.