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Burgers
OFF DUTY



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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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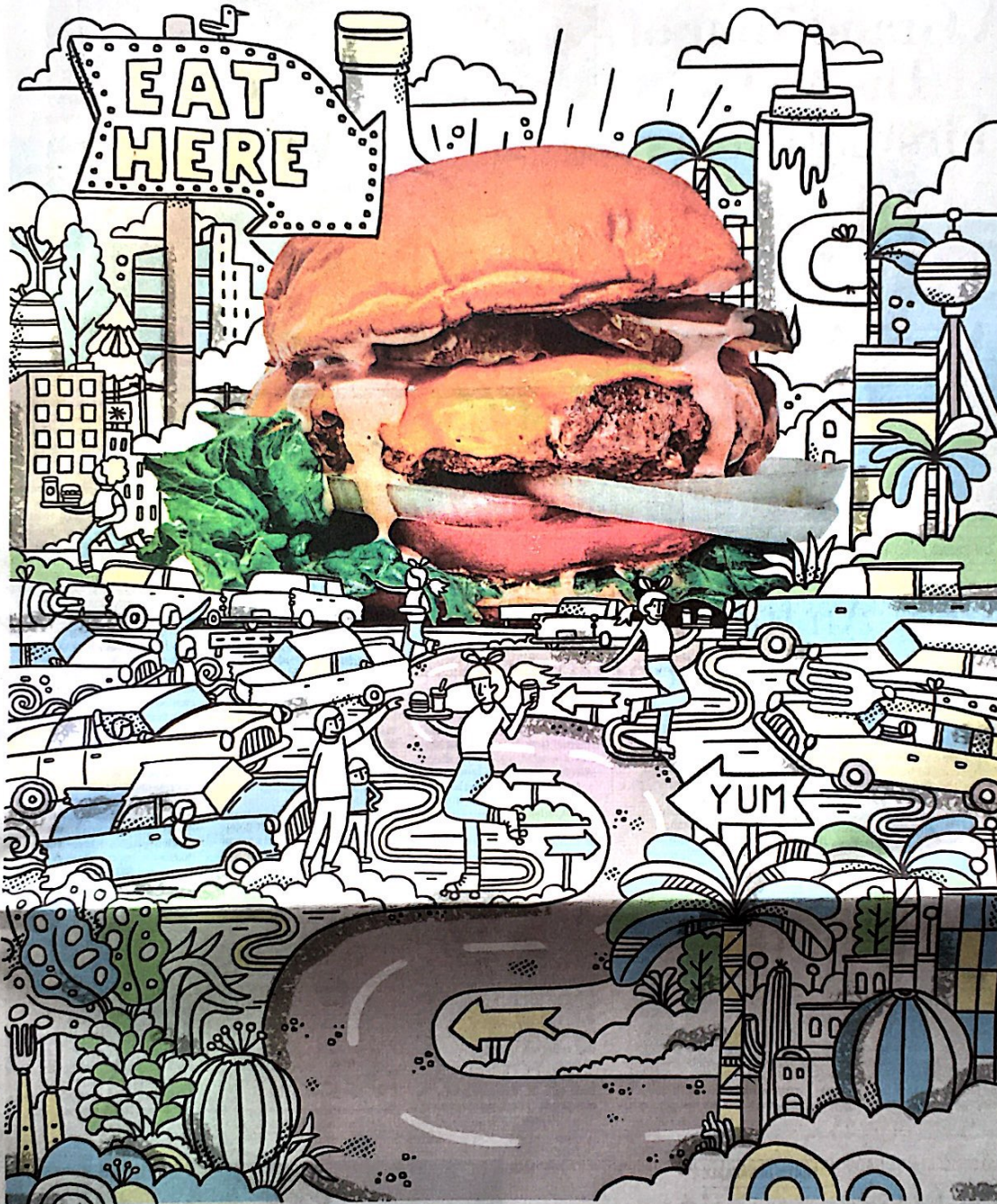


ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES COLETTA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. FOOD STYLING BY FLARE. POSTER BY HANNOCK

BY ELEANORE PARK

AS A TEENAGER in Los Altos, Calif., one of my first jobs was at Brian's Place, the sort of neighborhood diner fairly common in suburban America. The vinyl booths matched the covers on the menus. More than anything, the no-frills burger, served with iceberg lettuce on a squishy bun, kept me working there through high school. You know this burger. Maybe you've had it at your own go-to diner, drive-thru, old-school drive-in or neighborhood tavern. With its thin patty, generally a quarter-pound or under, and minimal garnishing, this one-handed meal is the great culinary legacy of 20th-century American car culture.

As a new millennium dawned, this unpretentious and delicious burger was eclipsed by a big-

One for The Road

It's the fuel for summer adventures and what memories are made of. No wonder the classic drive-in burger is back.

ger, beefier style loaded with ever more outré toppings. In 2003, Jeff Weinstein opened the Counter in Los Angeles, boasting ultra-customizable burgers with 10 different cheeses, 26 toppings, 17 sauces and 8 buns to choose from. Patties came in three sizes, the heaviest a 1-pound behemoth. This period also brought us chef Daniel Boulud's DB Burger, a patty of ground sirloin with a core of wine-braised short rib, foie gras and black truffles.

In the last few years, thankfully, the classic diner/drive-thru-style burger has made a comeback, showing up even at fine-dining and Michelin-starred restaurants such as Lazy Bear in San Francisco and the Four Horsemen in Brooklyn. More than ever, during the Covid-19 pandemic the humble thin-patty burger is striking a chord.

"I think it's coming back around because people

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EATING & DRINKING

Hamburger Nation

Continued from page D1
are realizing that with quality ingredients, handled the right way, the burger can speak for itself," said Guy Fieri, host and co-executive producer of "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives" on the Food Network. "It doesn't need all the mumble jumbo."

I was lucky enough to find a superb iteration of this minimalist style at my neighborhood restaurant, Alameda, in Brooklyn. Chef Nick Padilla found inspiration in his native Minnesota: the Lucy Lucy served at Matt's Bar in Minneapolis, a small-patty burger with molten cheese on the inside. (See "Keepers of the Flame," at right.) "We wanted something that was approachable and not fussy," said Mr. Padilla. "But we made a couple upgrades."

The chef used dry-aged meat from local butchers the Meat Hook and added toppings of lettuce, tomato, onion, housemade garlic-dill pickles and a simple but definitely special sauce of mayonnaise, ketchup and mustard. "There can be as much thoughtfulness in the composition as there is in elevated dishes," said Mr. Padilla.

That's true of the burger at the Oinkster in Los Angeles, too. Owner Andre Guerrero emigrated from the Philippines in the 1950s and cooked in restaurants across L.A. before opening the Oinkster in 2006. The menu is as retro as the Oinkster's A-frame structure, but with a Slow Food ethos. Mr. Guerrero keeps the burger basic but uses fresh ground Nebraska Angus beef, real cheese and housemade condiments.

That burger made a deep impression on his son Frederick Guerrero, who co-founded Burgers in L.A.'s Chinatown in 2015. The opening menu there was mostly vegan—with the exception of a classic beef burger inspired by the one at In-N-Out Burger, California's first drive-thru hamburger stand, now a chain



If you'd like to enjoy a classic American burger without leaving home, find a recipe at wsj.com/food



Scott Shutt // KEWPEE HAMBURGERS (111 N. Elizabeth St. and two other locations, Lima, Ohio; kewpeehamburgers.com) Started working there in 1979; his parents started in 1957 and became owners in 1980. // **The order:** The mustard-pickle-onion is probably our most popular. Or our Special Miracle Whip, lettuce and tomato. Plus a frosted malt and a slice of pie. // **Why customers have lined up since 1928:** "The quality, the locally raised beef, the freshness. You talk about comfort food. It's not just nutrition, it's something more."



Demil Disson // DICK'S DRIVE-IN (111 NE 45th St., Seattle, and 6 other locations; dicks.com) Started working there in 2014. // **The order:** The Deluxe two 1/2-pound patties with cheese, shredded lettuce, mayo and relish. Plus hand-cut fries and a hand-dipped shake. // **Why customers have lined up since 1954:** "I still get a burger almost every day. Even now at the restaurant, everything feels kind of normal when you eat a cheeseburger and a fry, and it's the same cheeseburger and the same fry you remember."



Karen Marwell // THE BEACON DRIVE-IN (255 John B. White, Sr. Blvd., Spartanburg, S.C.; beacondrivein.com) Started working there in 1998; co-owner since 2015. // **The order:** Beacon Burger, two patties with cheddar, mayonnaise, lettuce, tomato. Order it "A-Plenty," buried in fries and onion rings. // **Why customers have lined up since 1946:** "It's the tradition, I mean, we still have curb hops. You pull up, eat in your car or get it to go, and you never have to leave your vehicle. Right now, that's really comforting to people."

'On a road trip, a quick stop and bite will almost always be a burger.'

of over 350 locations in six states. "We wanted to go back to a simple, democratic hamburger for \$5," said the younger Mr. Guerrero.

With the restaurant doing limited, takeout-and-delivery-only service during the pandemic and because a fully vegan menu was always the goal, Burgerslords no longer offers a beef burger. But the vegan cheeseburger, a custom blend of grains and vegetables, delivers the same nostalgia—another example of this burger style's adaptability and enduring appeal.

During the coronavirus crisis, other restaurants are recognizing the virtues in the old model of a limited burger-based menu with takeout service. Back in 2016, Scott Clark and his partner, Alexis Liu, opened Dad's Luncheonette in Half Moon Bay, a half-hour south of San Francisco. Mr. Clark had been working as the chef de cuisine at the multi-Michelin-starred Saison and decided to shift away from the long hours of fine dining; when starting a family, his burgers are cooked in the traditional diner style. The beef is cut, ground and portioned into 4-ounce balls prior to the restaurant's opening each day. To order, the burgers are seasoned with salt and pepper and smashed onto the grill, creating a savory, textured crust.

Dad's retrofitted caboose sits right on Highway 1. "On a road trip, a quick stop and bite will almost always be a burger," said Mr. Clark. Formerly, the caboose seated 12-14 diners; now it offers takeaway only.

"We had the structure in place," said Ms. Liu. "We were super fortunate and grateful that we didn't have to adapt as much as other restaurants."

Alameda wasn't so fortunate. Mr. Padilla had to close it last month.

"It's the hardest thing to make the smart decision," he said. "For us it meant pulling the plug when we couldn't make a [lease] deal even though there's a huge emotional connection to the business."

Even during a difficult time, Mr. Padilla was kind enough to share his recipe with me. I expected to uncover some chefy secret that made his burger so special. Turns out, the true genius of the thin-patty burger is its straightforwardness. "We don't do anything to the beef except shaping it without overworking it," said Mr. Padilla. "That's it. There's nothing to it." It's as simple as can be.



Pete Demiris // HIRAM'S ROADSTAND (1345 Palisade Ave., Fort Lee, N.J.; 201-592-9602) Started working there in 1981, owner since 2001. // **The order:** "A cheeseburger, a dog and a fry would be CB, dog, fry. Eight dogs, four fries, an onion ring and a cheeseburger would be eighty-four, a ring and a CB." (Got that?) // **Why customers have lined up since 1928:** "I don't care how busy it is, we converse, back and forth. They give us crap, we're gonna give them crap. And it's a free show to boot."



Bred Welt // BONANZA DRIVE-UP (505 Hwy. 99 South, Cottage Grove, Ore.; weltdriveup.com) Started working there in 1980, when his family purchased it. // **The order:** The Original, a Willamette Valley beef patty with shredded lettuce, tomato, red onion, pickles and tangy Eureka! Sauce, on a butter-grilled bun. And don't miss the soft serve. // **Why customers have lined up since 1949:** "We've stayed with the times but also stayed with the classics the families who have come here for generations have always known."



Michael Osborn // PIE 'N' BURGER (913 E. California Blvd., Pasadena, Calif.; pienburgers.com) Started working there in 1972, owner since 1992. // **The order:** 1/2-pound patty on a buttered, toasted bun with housemade Thousand Island, pickles, lettuce and tomato. "We also have a really good patty melt, on rye with grilled onions." And 20¢ pies. // **Why customers have lined up since 1963:** "It's sort of symbiotic with the community and staff. It may sound hokey, but every one's special here, and we treat them that way."

Keepers of the Flame

Here, we salute the people who keep the flat-tops sizzling at America's most beloved burger joints. Drive on up. In a challenging moment for restaurants, their time-tested business model—portable, reliably good food at a fair price—looks better than ever.

—Edited from interviews by Beth Kracklauer



Andy Yee // WHITE HUT (280 Memorial Ave., West Springfield, Mass.; whitehut.com) Started working there in 2020, when his family's Bean Restaurant Group purchased the business from the founding family. // **The order:** "My go-to is a single with cheese and what we call the works: raw onions, relish and mustard. Love that burger." (Call it a "cheesburger" if you want to pass for a local.) // **Why customers have lined up since 1939:** "Consistency. We're going to preserve that at White Hut for the next generations."



Paul Rees // MATT'S BAR (2500 Cedar Ave., Minneapolis; mattsbar.com) Started working there in 2003, now co-general manager and, in his words, "head burger jockey." // **The order:** The Lucy Lucy, two patties squeezed together with a molten-cheese center. "We don't overpower it with a large bun. We don't put a lot of toppings on. It's focused on the meat and the cheese." // **Why customers have lined up since 1954:** "It's the vibe. You know, it's a neighborhood establishment. We keep it simple and we keep it fresh."



Matt Bullington // TEXAS TAVERN (114 Church Ave. SW, Roanoke, Va.; texas-tavern-inc.com) Started working there in 1994, under his dad, who took over from his father and his father's father before him. // **The order:** Cheesy Western, a burger with a scrambled egg and cheese on top. "If you want onions, ask for it." With "Say, Give me a Cheesy with." // **Why customers have lined up since 1930:** "People go in and it looks like they did when their grandfather brought them. It's a connection you can't get going to Starbucks."



George Demopoulos // ZACK'S HAMBURGERS (4009 South Blvd., Charlotte, N.C.; zackshamburgers.com) Started working there at 15, when his parents founded the business. // **The order:** Zack's Special double cheeseburger, lettuce, tomato, mayo, pickle, onion, special sauce, with fries or for 65 cents more, onion rings. // **Why customers have lined up since 1975:** "You know 'The Andy Griffith Show'? I always say we're a Mayberry place in the big city. We just work from our hearts and with a great deal of passion."



Edward Graham // ROBERT'S GRILL (300 S. Bickford Ave., El Reno, Okla.; 405-262-1262) Started working there when he was 12, in 1979, owner since 1989. // **The order:** Onion-fried burger, with thin-sliced onions pressed into the patty and caramelized on the griddle. "You can start out with the Coney, our hot dog—it's a homemade chili and slaw dog. That way you have a little appetizer." // **Why customers have lined up since 1926:** "We start off with a quality product. And people like visiting with us."

ALAMEDA: GUY FIERI; KEWPEE: SCOTT SHUTT; DICK'S: DEMIL DISSON; BEACON: KAREN MARWELL; HIRAM'S: PETE DEMIRIS; BONANZA: BRED WELT; PIE 'N' BURGER: MICHAEL OSBORN; MATT'S BAR: PAUL REES; TEXAS TAVERN: MATT BULLINGTON; ZACK'S HAMBURGERS: GEORGE DEMOPOULOS; ROBERT'S GRILL: EDWARD GRAHAM