

# Placing a Premium on Burgers

Influences and convictions play a role in determining the sort of burger to bring to the table.

By Jody Shee

Burgers are like opinions; there are plenty of them, and everyone thinks theirs are the best. Opinions are only slightly more plentiful than burgers in fine dining, but maybe not for long. Burgers, most prominent in the casual-dining segment with 57% penetration, had a 30% penetration increase in the fine-dining segment over the past three years, according to data-research company Datassential in a Menutrends Direct report.

No chef is above burgers—not even Thomas Keller, Daniel Boulud, Bobby

Flay, Marcus Samuelsson and Laurent Tourondel—each with his own version. They and other chefs bring their backgrounds, preferences and sensibilities to the cutting board in developing their rendition of the perfect premium burger.

It's a valuable exercise to search others' perspectives for nuances worth exploring and incorporating. Examine burgers from the following six vantages. It could be the springboard into the perfect patty—with accompaniments.

**1 Dry-aged** From his steakhouse view, Rick Gresh, executive chef at David Burke's Primehouse in Chicago, took the dry-aging concept the restaurant is known for and developed the 40 Day Dry Aged

Representing Southwestern French cuisine, Sebastien Archambault developed the signature RH Burger featuring black angus beef, foie gras and morels served with truffled triple-fried french fries.





"Burker." *Chicago* magazine ranked it among the top 10 in its 2009 "Top Burgers in Chicago" feature.

After much steakhouse-burger experimentation, Gresh ended up back at the beginning. He simply took the restaurant's 40-day dry-aged boneless shoulder chuck, trimmed the exterior, ground the meat and developed the beloved burger. "Encapsulating all that is 'steakhouse,' we use a potato bun and add sautéed garlicky spinach with fried shallots and bacon mayonnaise. That's our house burger," he says.

Served with truffle/Asiago cheese fries, the meal costs \$12. For an additional charge, guests can add a fried egg, veggie slaw or angry (spicy) shrimp or lobster on top. "Customers love it. It's a great way to get the flavor of the restaurant and not have a huge sticker price," Gresh says.

The restaurant makes good use of its temperature- and humidity-controlled Himalayan-salt-tiled dry-aging room, which gives the meat what Gresh calls "a super-beefy flavor." The potato bun, which a local bake shop makes for him, has a firm, chewy texture with a bit of moisture that holds up well under the burger and is reminiscent of potato focaccia. For his bacon mayonnaise, Gresh simply adds a little rendered bacon fat to regular mayonnaise, emulsifies, and adds chopped bacon, salt and pepper.

## 2 Green

Eco-friendly, sustainable and healthful is the ideal behind the burgers served at EVOS®, a group of eight restaurants with headquarters in Tampa, Fla. The beef comes from humanely treated, grass-fed antibiotic- and hormone-free cows. With an equal interest in burger consumers who might worry about tainted beef, EVOS' beef is source-verified. "It comes from one place, and the animal is tracked from the time it's born to when its life ends, to make sure it was completely healthy," says co-founder Dino Lambridis.

The burgers (called, free-range steakburgers) are baked to avoid the possibility of cancer-causing heterocyclic amines (HCAs), which can be introduced into meats cooked at high temperatures (often from frying, broiling and barbecuing).

"Consumers are skeptical of 'healthier' claims. They think you'll sacrifice taste," Lambridis says. "We formulate recipes to bring out flavor."

Guests can take their burgers to the "Ketchup Karma" bar and add one of three flavors of ketchup: spicy, garlic or mesquite-flavored barbecue.

## 3 Outstanding ingredients

Wagyu beef is only the beginning of the premium nature of the burger at Chicago's Sola Restaurant. Plenty of

Left: The 40 Day Dry Aged "Burker" developed by Rick Gresh ranked among the top 10 burgers in *Chicago* magazine in 2009. Right: Guests at Carol Wallack's Sola Restaurant experience the ultimate in premium burgers when they order the Wagyu "Kobe" Beef Burger with Cambozola, bacon, pineapple-caramelized onions and arugula on a pretzel roll.

guests order the Wagyu "Kobe" Beef Burger with Cambozola, bacon, pineapple-caramelized onions and arugula on a pretzel roll with Asian slaw or fresh fruit.

Chef/owner Carol Wallack is quick to point out that each ingredient is highly intentional. She started by grinding her own wagyu steak into burgers, though she eventually asked her meat purveyor to grind according to her specs (77% meat to 23% fat for perfect juiciness and flavor). She only sources local, organic arugula, and zeroed in on Cambozola, a triple-cream, Bavarian Brie-style cheese with a blue vein that contributes its own flavor dimension.

Wallack makes bacon from pork bellies she buys from a local farmer. She seasons them with peppercorns, ginger and lemon grass to suit her American-with-Asian-influence style, then smokes the pork bellies using Hawaiian mesquite wood. She caramelizes the onions in rendered bacon fat with a bit of pineapple juice. "There's a reason for all the flavors," she says. "The acid from the

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—Dino Lambridis

pineapple cuts some of the richness of the bacon fat. The fat gives the onion a smoky flavor, but full of ginger and lemon grass. The richness of the meat, in the way it’s loosely ground, helps it stay moist.”

There’s even strategy with Wallack’s pretzel roll. She cuts  $\frac{2}{3}$  for the bottom and  $\frac{1}{3}$  for the top, so when the burger is cooked rare to medium-rare, the bun holds up under the juice.

“I hate gratuitous things on the plate. They have to be there for a reason. Ours is all quality and all made in our restaurant, or thought of and sought out because they are what they are,” Wallack says.

**4 French inspired** Perhaps nothing represents Southwestern French cuisine quite like foie gras, so the burger marriage of black angus and seared foie gras was destiny for Sebastien Archambault, executive chef at RH at the Andaz hotel, West Hollywood, Calif. The signature RH Burger features black angus beef, foie gras and morels served with truffled triple-fried french fries.

Archambault, who was classically trained in France, already grasped the virtues of beef topped with seared foie gras. He took the French theme even further on his burger by incorporating morel sauce, which also is regionally common. For that, he starts with dried morels from France, which he soaks overnight, drains and combines with chopped shallots, butter and white wine. He

reduces, and adds chicken jus and chicken stock. After cooking for 30 minutes, he adds heavy cream and reduces until he gets the thickness he wants.

Atop a brioche bun, he places the 8-ounce burger and the seared foie gras (crispy on top and soft and smooth inside), adding the creamy morel sauce on top. On the side sits the top of the bun along with arugula and a slice of heirloom tomato.

The flavor? “The combination of beef and seared foie gras is very good. Then you have the nice, creamy mushroom taste with the morel sauce,” Archambault says. “The foie gras is sweet, the cream is sweet, the arugula is spicy. The tomato is cold and a bit sour. The brioche bun is very soft and warm. You have a balance between texture and taste.”

#### Mexican spice

**5** The family of Gonzalo Rivera Jr., executive chef of La Marea restaurant at The Tides South Beach hotel in Miami Beach, Fla., immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico, bringing with them a rich Mexican food heritage. Later, when the Mina Group sought to expand outside the U.S., it opened Nemi Restaurant in Mexico City, with Rivera as executive chef. There, he immersed himself further in all that’s Mexican. So it was only natural for him to go Mexican with the burger he developed for The Tides.

Its assembly starts with an onion kaiser roll. Then the burger (80% ground chuck

to 20% fat) is patted with Rivera’s spice mix of cayenne pepper, ground pepper, garlic powder, onion powder, smoked-paprika powder and ancho chile powder. It’s cooked medium-rare and topped with a quality pepper jack cheese.

That’s only the beginning. To make the flavor pop, Rivera adds a deep-fried, breaded poblano pepper. (He deep-fries the pepper to release the skin, peels, cuts in quarters and dredges in egg wash, flour and panko, then fries.) A deep-fried onion ring breaded with cornmeal and polenta goes on top of the pepper and forms a cup to hold the housemade pico de gallo, special barbecue sauce and buttermilk aioli, which features an emulsification of buttermilk and champagne vinegar with roasted garlic and chives.

“People tell me they’ve been eating burgers since they were born, and this is the best burger they’ve ever had,” Rivera says.

**6 Fun factor** A year ago, when Sean Brasel, executive chef/partner of Meat Market in Miami Beach, Fla., assembled a menu for the new restaurant, he figured he had to come up with something fun for the steakhouse environment. “Fun” became his Kobe Beef Slider Duo appetizer, served on a long, skinny plate with a mini salad in between, for \$15. After testing 30 ideas, he landed on two slider flavor winners: bacon with white cheddar; and foie gras with mango mustard and caramelized onions.

Both start with American kobe beef. Before Brasel landed on bacon with white

At La Marea, executive chef Gonzalo Rivera Jr. adds his own Mexican spice mix to this burger and tops with pepper jack cheese, deep-fried breaded poblano pepper, deep-fried onion ring breaded with cornmeal and polenta and his housemade pico de gallo, special barbecue sauce and buttermilk aioli.

cheddar, he tried four or five cheeses. "I liked the flavor of white cheddar and how it worked with the applewood bacon and roasted garlic aioli," he says.

For the other slider, he felt mango mustard complemented the richness of the foie gras and the caramelized onions. He begins with a toasted brioche bun, smooths on a bit of mango mustard and adds the burger that has gone into the oven for a minute to melt the foie gras. Then he adds the caramelized onions. The mini salad combines Belgian endive, micro greens and sliced cherry tomatoes.

Kobe beef is also the upscale burger of choice for Jeff Buerhaus, chef/owner of Walter's in Portland, Maine. He chooses kobe with a high fat content for the dribble-down-the-chin effect. He serves it on a brioche bun for the sweetness and adds caramelized onions and his housemade 999 dressing (a play on Thousand Island).

Why burgers on an upscale menu?  
"Sometimes, at night, people don't want a fork-and-knife meal. They want to eat something more easygoing, but on the higher end," Buerhaus says. Kobe beef burgers fit the bill.

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The Tides South Beach

## Matters of meat

Save yourself some burger-trial time. Square One Burgers in Tampa, Fla., majors in variety, and chef/owner Joanie Corneil shares the juicy details of her five chosen ground meats.

### Angus Montana-raised Meyer

**Natural Angus beef** is Corneil's preference, because she believes it has the best flavor and it doesn't fall apart. It is tender and moist and is the most popular burger meat at Square One Burger.

### Buffalo

Corneil chooses organic buffalo, and it's the second-best seller. With lower fat content (lower even than chicken and turkey), buffalo is a little dryer and a bit chewier than angus, and the flavor is milder. Some customers see buffalo as a healthy burger option.

### Kobe

Corneil's is American-raised. The texture is a little more dense, and it tastes like butter. It's very rich, and is a big hit, she says. She tops it with a slice of Brie and caramelized onions.

### Chicken

Ground by a local butcher, Corneil specs 70/30 white to dark meat with no added fat. It's coarsely ground, so it isn't fine, like angus, and is very moist. "It feels like eating a burger, but tastes like a good piece of chicken," she says.

### Turkey

Because white turkey meat is dryer than white chicken meat, Corneil specs 60/40 white to dark meat with no added fat. Like the chicken burger, it is moist. Square One Burgers sells more turkey burgers than chicken burgers.