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Burger time: Old reliable goes from paper sack to center stage

By [JOHN KESSLER](#)

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About 9:30 p.m. each evening, a fresh group of customers begins to arrive at Holeman & Finch Public House in south Buckhead. By 9:45 the house is full, and by 9:55 the anticipation palpable. Then, at precisely 10 p.m., partner Greg Best pulls out a bullhorn stashed behind the bar and announces, "It's burger time, y'all."

The response? Customers whistle, cheer, whoop and holler. A minute and a half later, the hamburgers have sold out.

What is this object of between-bun desire? Essentially a 100 percent handmade version of the Double-Double at In-N-Out Burger, a chain big in the West — two drippy patties, each slicked with molten cheese, served on a soft bun with house ketchup, mustard and pickles.

Across Atlanta, a new wave of hamburgers has begun to create a serious ruckus. No longer the redoubt of unadventurous diners, the all-American hamburger has suddenly become the headliner on creative menus of every stripe. Chefs now make big noises about sourcing their ingredients and personally grinding quality beef and customizing garnishes that go far beyond lettuce and tomato. Today's hamburger is the *Zeitgeist* itself, served up on a sesame seed bun.

"It's a comprehensive trend across the country," said restaurant consultant Clark Wolf, who advises clients from his offices in New York and Northern California. "This has all coalesced at the exact time when we were looking for something accessible and comfortable to put our faces into."

Wolf says the burger trend has been building for years but has exploded in response to the economic downturn.

"After the market crash in 1987, it was roast chicken and mashed potatoes. Now, it's hamburgers," he noted.

For some Atlanta chefs, the burger is a way to showcase their commitment to top-drawer ingredients. At Kevin Rathbun Steak, the \$14 burger is a paragon of quality — 8 ounces of U.S.D.A. Prime ribeye, each patty ground to

order.

This approach is in keeping with burgers Wolf has seen across the country. “We want every bit to be farmer-grown and cooker-ground, and we will accept no substitutions and no tarting up.”

Well, maybe a little tarting up.

Chef Billy Allin at Cakes & Ale in Decatur also grinds his own, opting for a mixture of brisket, chuck and — for fatty, drippy juiciness — pork belly.

“The flavor is better than beef fat,” he said.

In what may be a first in all Burgerdom, the Cakes & Ale hamburger is *seasonal*. In summer Allin serves it with a soft brioche bun, chopped raw onion and tomato slices. Now, for cooler weather, pastry chef Cynthia Wong bakes him a seeded sourdough English muffin, and he grills the onions.

“We have people who got really mad when we took the first burger off,” Allin admitted. “But what really makes a summer burger is the super fresh tomato.”

For many chefs, the hamburger has become a vehicle to project their cooking sensibilities, if not their personal history. Carmen Cappello, a proud Philadelphian who recently took over the kitchen at the Lamplighter near Oakland Cemetery, bestows brotherly love on his hamburger in the form of a gooey round of homemade scrapple.

At the stylish new Dogwood restaurant in Midtown across from the Bank of America building, chef Shane Tuohy gets raves for his unique burger outfitted with Thomasville Tomme cheese (from Georgia’s Sweet Grass Dairy), smokehouse bacon, garlic aioli and homemade bread-and-butter pickles.

Food stylist Tami Hardeman, posting on Yelp.com, detailed a number of intricate dishes, including a soup topped with mascarpone and crab salad. Yet all the gourmet creations aside, she concluded, “The high point for me has been the burger.”

For proof that burger beatification has reached the highest levels in Atlanta, look no further than the Dining Room at the Ritz-Carlton Buckhead, where nationally renowned chef Arnaud Berthelier has just debuted a menu of five Kobe-beef hamburgers. They range from a \$16 “Classic” bacon cheeseburger to a \$65 “Deluxe” version outfitted with foie gras, black truffles and aged Comte cheese. Others are in the \$18-\$20 range.

Hotel manager Olivia Brown said the burgers, which are served in the hotel bar and the casual Cafe, will let more food-savvy guests experience “the culinary talent of chef Arnaud Berthelier without the price tag of the Dining Room.”

Even so, the \$16 entry-level burger isn’t exactly cheap. Are diners in today’s economy really willing to pay a premium for a cheffy wimpie?

Apparently so. According to a new report from Technomic, a food-service consulting firm, today’s restaurantgoers are cutting back in their frequency of dining out. But a majority said they would spend more for quality. In a survey of more than 2,000 consumers, 61 percent said they would pay more for a higher quality sandwich if it contained premium meat, 41 percent if it contained premium cheese and 34 percent if it contained premium bread.

Indeed, restaurant chains such as Ted’s Montana Grill have gotten consumers used to the notion of a premium hamburger that costs \$10 or more. More are on the way.

The Counter, a California-based chain that opened its first Georgia location in Roswell, operates in the kind of spare, bright, minimalist setting where your eye picks out the light fixtures and wine bottles behind the bar before anything else. That’s it, until a waiter whisks by with one of the bodaciously heaped “Custom Built Burgers.”

You tick off a list of gourmet add-ons from a long list on a clipboard and then see whether there's any way to wedge your jaw around the burger you devise. It's a quick trip to L.A.

Another nine outposts of the Counter are planned around Atlanta. Yet the burger bar — sorry, make that the “burger *boutique*” — that food-savvy Atlantans are most watching for is Flip. Expected to open imminently on Howell Mill Road on Atlanta's west side, this all-burger spot is a collaboration between restaurateur Barry Mills and “Top Chef” finalist Richard Blais — perhaps Atlanta's most famous and surely its most unorthodox chef.

“The idea is fine dining between two buns,” Mills said. “The full service, the atmosphere, the design — it's all about the details, and we want to bring them down to the hamburger and redefine it. Bring them all to a burger boutique.”

Mills says the restaurant will feature a full bar, and the burgers will range from good old beef to more exotic ones. Blais, who is known for his boundless invention, will grind the basic burger from short ribs, hanger steak and brisket, but he'll also make room on the menu for a premium Kobe beef burger and a lamb patty with green olive relish and raisin ketchup. Others will feature lobster and shrimp. Milkshake flavors will range from vanilla to Krispy Kreme.

“The hamburger has had such a long past with America and had been in that diner mode for so long,” Mills said. “We want to bring a lot of different stuff into it. It's fun to work with, and people relate to it. You can do a lot with a burger.”

Yet Mills knows which side his bun is ketchuped on. Americans are turning to burgers, even fancy ones, because they are relatively cheap. He hopes to keep the price of a basic burger down in the midsingle digits.

“With the economy the way it is,” he said, “we can still keep it in that financial comfort zone.”

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