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Burger toppings take a twist

by [Richard A. Webster](#) * • 23 Aug 2007

When Mandeville, La.-based Times Grill restaurants took a popular appetizer and morphed it into a burger topping, the result was more than a meal — it became an experience.

“We had a chorizo con queso appetizer and we wondered what it would taste like on a burger,” Shearn Lemoine, chief burger officer, said of the genesis of the El Camino Burger. “So we smothered the burger in chorizo sausage and cheese, topped it with fresh jalapeno chips and served salsa on the side. And people love it. It’s turned the hamburger into an experience.”



Burgers in restaurants across the country are undergoing similar upgrades as today’s customers are in search of different and unique toppings and, more frequently, restaurants are giving it to them.

Gourmet gains ground

One of the drivers behind the revamped relishes is the trend toward gourmet.

“If it’s perceived as gourmet, it belongs on a burger,” said Aaron Allen, CEO of Heathrow, Fla.-based Quantified Marketing Group. “There is a reinvention of the burger taking what we’ve always known and making it new again.”

William Gillen, vice president of culinary operations for Fuddruckers, agreed. He said the gourmet burger market is exploding, and changing the way people view what was once perceived as a grab-and-go meal.

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“New York restaurants are serving burgers topped with foie gras and truffles,” he said. “Diners today are more in tune than they’ve ever been and they want to go some place and be excited, and see something different.”

For Thanksgiving, Fuddruckers guests will see something different, indeed: a turkey burger dressed with brie cheese and cranberry, orange and marmalade relish.

The surge in innovative toppings also has gathered steam from the customer's desire to upgrade, Allen said.

"People would rather have the \$12 martini than the \$6 martini, and they'd rather have the \$7 burger than the \$4 burger," he said. "The more expensive the better it is as perceived by the consumer."

What's out there?

Some toppings are simply unusual. Cassandra Mas, lead development chef for Quantified Marketing Group, said some of the most unique toppings for burgers are Korean barbecue and housemade kimchee; fried oysters and rémoulade; Cuban matchstick potatoes; avocado slices and green goddess dressing; chorizo and piquillo peppers; and fried shallots and chevre cheese.

Others are designed to fill a niche or a need. With this mentality, Times Grill created the Cajun Sunset, a burger topped with a pan-fried egg.

"To me, that is a burger that makes a lot of sense," Lemoine said. "A lot of people are thrown back by it but you combine a little breakfast and lunch and add cheese and bacon and that's an experience that gets better as the day gets later."

When Lemoine opened a new location in Baton Rouge close to Louisiana State University, he wanted to design the perfect burger for the college student.

"I love cheese fries and hamburgers, so why not try a burger topped with cheese fries and bacon and served with a side of cheese fries?" he said. "That would be the ultimate college freshman hamburger. People go nuts for it."

For each creation, Times Grill begins with ingredients it already has, then poses a challenge to employees. The key to inspiring new ideas, Lemoine said, is having no limits.

"You keep an open mind, think out of the box and enjoy the lack of limitations," he said. "I don't know of any other sandwich that invites so many variations."

A world of choices

Globalization has increased people's willingness to try new flavors and foods, said Jeff Weinstein, CEO of Los Angeles-based The Counter, a build-your-own gourmet burger restaurant that boasts more than 312,120 possible combinations of toppings, meat and buns. As more people travel and dine on the local fare, their palates become accustomed to diverse flavors, he said.

"We live in a country with so many different ethnicities that people aren't afraid of what they used to be afraid of," Weinstein said. "Instead of a regular mustard or mayonnaise, they're willing to try a garlic aioli."

That's not all the customers at The Counter are willing to try. Diners may choose from 10 types of cheese, including Greek feta, gruyere, herb goat cheese and horseradish cheddar, and 17 sauces, including peanut, sun-dried tomato vinaigrette, apricot and caramelized onion marmalade. A total of 27 toppings are available, such as fried and hard-boiled eggs, spicy pepperoncini, dried cranberries and homemade guacamole.

Such diversity on the menu helps break up the monotony of everyday dining, Weinstein said.

"Who wants the same thing every day for the rest of their lives?" he asked.

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