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GlobalGourmet / One of the most common foods in the U.S. is getting a makeover at upscale hamburger havens around the country. Whether it's made with beef, turkey, lamb, or soy, your next burger could go way beyond basic.

By Linda Hayes / Photography by Bob Stefko

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A New Breed of Burger

Jimmy Buffet sang their praises (“I like mine with lettuce and tomato, Heinz 57 and French fried potatoes ...”). *Saturday Night Live* performed skits around them (“Cheeseburger! Cheeseburger! Cheeseburger!”). Specialty fast-food chains permanently ingrained their slogans (“Where’s the Beef?”), recipes (“Two all-beef patties ...”), and descriptive terminology (“sliders”) into the culinary lexicon. Now, beef-minded chefs are elevating America’s beloved burger to an even higher status, dedicating grill space and sometimes entire restaurants to creative preparations and presentations.

Ingredients and toppings range wildly. Connoisseurs can wrap their hands around burgers made not only from quality beef, including ultratender (and ultraexpensive) Kobe, which comes from Japanese Wagyu cattle that are massaged with saké and pampered with special diets, but also from free-range chicken, organic lamb, ocean-fresh ahi, and vegetables and soy. Toppings are often from local purveyors and artisanal producers. Themes borrow from cuisines around the world. To wash it all down, drink offerings are beefed up, too, with fine wines and microbrews listed beside milkshakes made with premium ice cream.

Can’t resist the sizzle? Bite into the burger craze at one of the hotspots below, or sniff around your own neighborhood. Chances are, there’s a burger with your name on it just coming off the grill.

Burger Bar, Las Vegas / Hubert Keller, the renowned French chef and owner of Fleur de Lys in San Francisco, recalls the motivation behind his opening Burger Bar in shiny Mandalay Place: “It was an accident,” he says with a laugh. “The opening of Fleur de Lys in Mandalay Bay was being delayed, and so was the burger joint that was planned for there. We took a ‘burger crash course’ and decided we’d do the best burger possible.”

Keller also decided to eschew the typical “burger joint” décor. Instead, he went upscale, creating a semi-brasserie with white-tiled walls, pressed-tin ceilings, mahogany booths, and a pair of granite-topped bars—one featuring 24 beers on tap, the other serving milkshakes and floats. A behind-the-scenes butcher shop ensures that every ounce of black Angus, American Kobe, and corn-fed Ridgefield Farm beef is freshly ground, every burger handmade.

The menu, overseen by chef-partner Laurent Pillard, went upscale, too. The invitation to compose your own

More Great Burgers

The **ahi burger** (seared ahi, wasabi aioli) at

Boa Steakhouse in West Hollywood,

California. *Tel: 323-650-8383 or boasteak.com*

balboa. The **lamb merguez burger** (yogurt sauce, olives, cucumber, onion, tomato) at

BLT Burger in New York. *Tel: 212-243-8226*

or bltburger.com. The **Larkburger** (Coleman

beef, truffle aioli) at Larkburger in Edwards,

Colorado. *Tel: 970-926-9336 or larkburger.com*.

com. There’s even a **classic burger** joint in

Japan at the new Parkside Diner in Tokyo’s

Imperial Hotel. *Tel: 81-3-3539-8046 or*

imperialhotel.co.jp

burger is hard to resist, starting with the bun (sesame, whole wheat, ciabatta), moving on to the type of meat (in addition to the three mentioned above, there are lamb, turkey, and vegetarian options), and finishing with a lengthy list of toppings from the farm (pan-seared foie gras, prosciutto), grill (peppers, pineapple), ocean (grilled lobster, anchovies), dairy or henhouse (mozzarella, fried egg), garden (pesto, avocado), pantry (salsa, cranberry sauce), and earth (black truffles, portobellos). High rollers favor the sophisticated Rossini burger, which features Kobe beef, sautéed foie gras, black Perigord truffles, and Madeira sauce. Late-night, you'll dine in the company of the city's top chefs.

3930 Las Vegas Boulevard. Open daily 10:30 a.m.–11 p.m., Friday and Saturday until 3 a.m. Tel: 702-632-9364 or fleurdeleyssf.com

brgr, New York / Burger fans have been lining up at this stylish Chelsea restaurant since it opened in December, and with good reason. Even its logo, a pair of hands wrapped around an abbreviated spelling (which, chef Chris Russell explains, “gets down to the essence of the burger”), makes you hungry.

Inside, the 2,000-square-foot space was designed by David Rockwell at a cost of a million dollars. It's appealing, with blonde wood floors, an open-beamed ceiling, exposed-brick walls, “burger banquettes” backed with colorfully cushioned disks, a community table, and counter seating overlooking the cooks. Blackboards list local purveyors, dry goods are stacked on stainless-steel wire shelves, and a window to the walk-in refrigerator gives insight into the freshness of the ingredients. “When everything is out in the open, it helps customers to understand the wholesomeness of our product,” says Russell, who switched from fine-dining kitchens at Moomba and Sage to “give burgers the respect they deserve.”

The 14-burger menu features one-third pound beef, turkey, and veggie creations. The beef is a custom blend of all-natural Angus from boutique supplier Montana Legend, the turkey comes from Plainville Farms in the Finger Lakes, and the soy-based veggie patties are homemade with fresh vegetables. Favorites include the No. 4 beef burger with American cheese, a free-range fried egg, and grilled onions; the No. 8 turkey burger with cheddar, avocado, radish sprouts, and herb mayonnaise; and the No. 4 veggie burger with Brie, sweet-onion marmalade, onions, lettuce, and pickles. For nonconformists, there's a do-it-yourself option, as well. Hand-cut sweet-potato fries are a must. Blueberry-pomegranate milkshakes give a delicious antioxidant edge.

287 Seventh Avenue (between 26th and 27th streets). Open daily 11 a.m.–11 p.m. Tel: 212-488-7500 or brgr.us

25 Degrees, Los Angeles / Named for the temperature difference between medium-rare and well-done, 25 Degrees is hot, hot, hot. The concept, a snazzy burger bar in Hollywood's historic/nouveau boutique Roosevelt Hotel, was devised by local restaurateurs Tim (voted Best New Chef in 2000 by Food & Wine magazine) and Liza Goodell, who also own Red Pearl Kitchens in Orange County, San Diego, and Hollywood. “It's a grownup interpretation of a burger stand, with quality versions of the most popular food in the country and a selection of 50 half-bottles of wine,” says Tim.

The décor, by designer Dodd Mitchell, falls far from the palm trees and sunshine outside with richly textured fuchsia wallpaper, chrome mirrors, crystal chandeliers, oxblood leather booths with wooden tables, and flat-screen TVs behind a slab walnut bar lined with leather stools. But it's playful, too.

Chef Michael McDonald and his kitchen crew add their own flavor and flair by way of a trio of hefty ground sirloin or turkey burgers. One sirloin version comes topped with caramelized onions, Big Woods blue cheese, crescenza cheese, bacon, arugula, and Thousand Island dressing; the other, with roasted tomatoes, crispy prosciutto, burrata cheese, and pesto. The turkey version features Straus Family jack cheese, green chili, chipotle sauce, and avocado. Should you want to build your own, toppings include a dozen artisanal cheeses, as well as extras such as sauerkraut, shiitake mushrooms, and fried eggs.

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7000 Hollywood Boulevard. Open daily for lunch and dinner. Tel: 323-785-7244 or 25degreesrestaurant.com

Viand, Chicago / Chef Steve Chiappetti is uniquely qualified to head the kitchen at Viand, in the heart of beef country, which has recently added a gourmet burger menu to its repertoire. “I’m a butcher’s son,” says the chef, whose family owns Chicago-based Chiappetti Lamb and Veal. “What better way to learn how to make the perfect burger?”

Crafted from dry-aged sirloin and beef tenderloin tips, the burgers are served during dinner hours in the sleek art deco bar, where local trendsetters mix with visitors in search of down-to-earth comfort food.

Down-to-earth, but with a twist. Chiappetti’s résumé includes a nomination for the James Beard Foundation’s Rising Chef Award, and he has garnered praise for a string of award-winning restaurants of his own, including Mango, Grapes, Rhapsody, and Café le Coq. Influences from those venues show up in his fondue burger (the beef is dipped in Gruyère fondue before being set atop a buttery brioche bun), the chimichurri-laced Cubano burger with fried onions and black-bean purée, and a Greek burger topped with eggplant spread, cucumber, and feta cheese. The surf and turf burger is a different take on tradition, with shrimp tossed in dill dressing jazzing up the beef. If you’re not a beef eater, try the chickpea Charlie burger with a tzatziki-like sauce, or the smoky Perdue chicken burger. A collection of 20 microbrews from around the Great Lakes region makes for perfect pairings.

155 East Ontario Street. Open daily for lunch 11:30 a.m.–3 p.m. (open at 11 a.m. on weekends) and dinner 5 p.m.–10 p.m. (until 11:30 p.m. on Saturdays). Tel: 312-255-8505 or viandchicago.com

Linda Hayes, a regular contributor to HEMISPHERES, gets her burger fix (Limousin beef, chipotle, jack, red onions, lettuce, tomato, and ketchup) at the Woody Creek Tavern near her home in Aspen, Colorado.

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