

LCT

A King Burger in Washington

Published: Tuesday, March 30, 2010



The cheeseburger that has drawn wide praise, with fixins'. Photo by Walter Kidd.

By Jack Coraggio

Some cheeseburgers are good, some are terrible and most may fall into the category of OK, but not inspiring. And then there are the brave, the proud and the few that are simply outstanding.

Given that the process is fairly uncomplicated, it may seem like more of a challenge to make a bad one than a decent one. And for generations chefs have attempted to elevate the culinary status of burgers by dressing them up with exotic toppings and vegetables, peppering them with wild spices and using different varieties of meat.

Every creative cook brings something unique to the conversation. For example, renowned chef Hubert Keller of Las Vegas sells a \$5,000 burger made of Kobe beef stuffed with black truffles.

In Litchfield County, or, for that matter, all of Connecticut, the best burger can be devoured 250 times before one would hit the mark set by the luxe burger served at Fleur de Lys at the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino.

This nonpareil burger belongs to Justin Ermini, executive chef of the Mayflower Inn & Spa in Washington. Just read the commentary on the “A Hamburger Today” Web site.

“I expected an okay, but overpriced, burger,” began a man identifying himself as Sean W. “I was wrong—it was burger nirvana. My wife and I, jaded New Yorkers both, had three over a two day period. Perhaps the best burger I have ever had, and their ‘Tap Room’ is a pleasant place to take down the beef and some alcohol.

“No, I am not a shill,” Mr. W continued, “just a long-time reader who unexpectedly happened upon an amazing burger.”

OK, it’s not exactly a Quinnipiac University poll, but these burgers have also earned high praise from the both Hartford Courant and New York Magazine. Indeed, the evolution and ultimate culmination of this “sandwich” (a dispiriting description that undermines the exquisite culinary quality) lands it in an elevated, though accessible, class.

“A year ago, all we did here was custom burgers,” said Mr. Ermini, recalling a time-consuming ritual in an already busy kitchen. “So I said ‘Listen, let me solve this problem,’ ... and if I do a burger, it’s got to be one that I’d want to eat.”

So he went to work, crafting the Mayflower signature cheeseburger, basing it on a unique recipe so well balanced that it’s “90 percent of the time untouched.”

It begins with the local, dry-aged-for-20-days organic beef, molded into an eight-ounce patty. It’s not meat from some faraway industrial cattle factory but Greyledge Farm in Bridgewater, which breeds its grass-and-grain-fed Black Angus steers. They’ve been given no additives and no hormones, and they’re ready to be harvested by age 2. Because the meat is not trucked in frozen from far away, the freshness is guaranteed.

“We don’t do anything to the meat,” said Mr. Ermini, who typically serves his burgers medium-rare, embellished only by some organic sea salt and pepper.

“Justin has truly raised the burger to an art form,” Terry Fitzgerald said in an e-mail. His opinion may be biased, given that Mr. Fitzgerald is the owner of Greyledge Farm. But the supplier is so terribly impressed that he repeatedly lavishes Mr. Ermini with lofty compliments.

“I personally believe he could go into a competition for the best burger in the country,” he later said. “They are nothing short of exceptional.”

As are all the ingredients. Underneath, not on top, of that half-pound hunk of ground heaven is the house-made garlic confit aioli. The chef understands that in restaurants everywhere, aioli has become so ubiquitous that it’s tantamount to mayonnaise. But his is different.

He doesn’t use raw garlic, for fear of overwhelming the palate. Instead he cooks it in olive oil, at low heat, for two hours. The result is a mild and creamy undertone.

On top of the burger is a slice of petit Basque cheese, an Iberian product borne from sheep's milk. Like its aioli counterpart, the cheese is flavorful without being overpowering. It adds complexity, and for that matter, class to the overall composition.

"This cheese is \$14 per pound," relayed Mr. Ermini, noting that petit Basque is usually reserved for platters. "When I said what I was using it for, our purveyor thought I was insane."

To keep with the Spanish theme, the cheese is topped by the Mayflower's version of piquillo pepper relish. Mr. Ermini and his crew roasts, peels and chops the peppers, adds them to a caramel sauce base, and balances it out with a sherry vinegar.

When it comes to the expectation of a flourish of something green, Mr. Ermini doesn't turn to a standard lettuce. Instead, fresh arugula is employed, and dressed lightly with olive oil and lemon juice. To keep it tucked neatly in, the kitchen scoops out part of the top bun, creating a cozy recess.

Oh, the bun. Made fresh in the Mayflower kitchen daily, the rolls are molded from wheat and regular flour, and then finished with an Italian chestnut honey that complements the earthy tones with a drop of sweetness.

"It's really about the bread," Mr. Ermini said. "We make the bread every day, that's my standard."

After a bite, it's immediately apparent that not one ingredient trumps another. This masterpiece is not all about the bread or the beef or the salt and pepper, or the aioli or the cheese or the relish or the springtime vegetables. It's about an amalgamation that creates total culinary harmony—it needs nothing more, and nothing should be removed.

Even the medium-rare temperature is just right. It's not too pink, it's juicy, and renders a cooking time suitable for the 70 percent lean grass-fed beef. Less fat, or longer grilling, runs the risk of drying burgers out.

Served only in the tap room, this cheeseburger is easily worth the asking price of \$19—especially considering that it comes with homemade steak fries that are salted and seasoned with parmesan and rosemary.

"No ketchup, no mustard," Mr. Ermini instructed. "It's completed; this is how we want you to eat it."

Yes, the Mayflower Inn is sensitive to dietary restrictions and allergies. So Mr. Ermini is not entirely inflexible. With a subtle tone of regret, he relents when necessary and makes tweaks.

"I mean, I guess if somebody wants to put bacon on it," he said, cocking his head a little, "We'll do it."

But try it his way first.

For reservations or more information, the Mayflower Inn & Spa may be reached at 860-868-9466. The Web site is www.mayflowerinn.com.