

Proof is in the taste

The humble hamburger has moved well beyond the domain of fast food chains. From New York to London to Paris, discerning diners around the globe are demanding top-of-the-line ingredients cooked to perfection and restaurants are stepping up to the challenge.

TEXT CARLA AVOLIO

IMAGES BAREBURGER /
BYRON / THOMAS BOWLES
/ HONEST BURGERS / BWB /
HACHE

IT WAS IN 2001 THAT FRENCH CHEF DANIEL BOULUD TOOK A SIRLOIN PATTY, STUFFED IT WITH RED WINE-BRAISED SHORT RIBS, FOIE GRAS AND TRUFFLES, AND IN DOING SO, REVOLUTIONISED THE HUMBLE HAMBURGER. MORE THAN MAKING THE GUINNESS BOOK OF WORLD RECORDS FOR THE MOST EXPENSIVE BURGER, HIS CREATION — CALLED THE ORIGINAL DB — IS CREDITED FOR BEING THE SPARK THAT SET OFF A

GOURMET BURGER TREND, WHICH HAS SPREAD LIKE WILDFIRE IN GLOBAL CITIES.

Thanks to the celebrity chef, this American classic is no longer just a cheap, preservative-laden fast-food item. Today's culinary scene has exploded with restaurants serving gourmet or "better" burgers using the finest ingredients like artisan breads, complex toppings and farmhouse cheeses. Even the big chains are improving their

product to meet the rising expectations of diners. Last year, Wendy's rolled out a burger served on a brioche bun, and Pizza Hut in the UK launched a cheeseburger pizza featuring "100 per cent British beef" patties baked into the crust.

"People are getting savvier and more discerning about everything — from the type of bun to the grind of the beef," says Tom Byng, founder of UK burger chain, Byron "It's a much more mature market than even

a few years ago and that helps to keep us on our toes."

Although over 10 years in the running, the gourmet burger trend is far from over, with a new report showing it might still be reaching its peak. Last year, over 50 per cent of North American consumers said it was "highly important" that their burgers were made from never-frozen beef — an increase from 43 per cent two years before. Darren Tristano, Executive Vice

President of Technomic, a Chicago-based food industry research firm which produced the report, says: "The better burger sector continues to thrive in the overall burger category and that shows no signs of stopping."

At the epicentre of this trend is New York — the birthplace of the Original db and the phenomenally popular ramen burger, which generated three-hour-long queues at a food fair last year. On any given

night, lines can be found snaking out the door of countless burger joints, from tiny corner bistros to chain restaurants.

At celebrity hangout The Spotted Pig, co-owned by rapper Jay Z and rockstar Bono, diners still wait in line for a taste of the Roquefort cheese-slathered chargrilled burger, even 10 years after the venue opened. More recently, crowds have been flocking to midtown establishment, Burger Joint, since its real cheddar

BELOW
Local and organic produce combined with alternative meats such as bison and ostrich form the basis of the menu at micro-chain Bareburger, which now has 17 eco-friendly restaurant throughout New York.



cheeseburger won The Ultimate New York Burger title last year. Meanwhile, well-known food writer, Josh Ozersky, a notorious hamburger purist, concedes that The Breslin's (gastropub at New York's Ace Hotel) chargrilled lamb burger with feta and cumin mayo is "incomparable."

At the greener end of the spectrum, offerings at Bareburger – with outlets across New York – which might feature elk topped with Amish blue cheese on a brioche bun, are

made using organic, locally-sourced ingredients. Bareburger CEO, Euripides Pelekanos, says that even in the crowded US burger ecosystem, the eco-friendly niche is still fairly vacant.

"Every major city now has its own local, organic, natural burger restaurant, and that trend will continue," he says.

Further east, a host of new venues have opened from Beijing to Singapore. Food blogger Melissa Koh, who dishes out her culinary adventures at melicacy.com, has noticed more and more

RIGHT
Burger chain Byron started out in London in 2007, but now have over 40 locations across the UK; indie burger joint, Honest now runs six outlets throughout London, including the King's Cross venue pictured here.

BELOW
Honest Burgers serve simple, quality-focused menu starring free-range chicken, dry aged beef and fresh market vegetables.



entrepreneurs in Singapore setting up burger joints where patties are fresh and handmade in-house. At the brand-new BWB I burger VS wings + bar, managed by Far East Organization's (FEO) franchise and restaurant arm, Kitchen Language, a couple of items on the menu have a Southeast Asian twist (think peanut-topped burgers and rice cake "buns").

Though a peanut butter burger might sound strange, Singaporeans are evidently huge fans. Apparently,

a high percentage of customers visiting BWB I burger VS wings + bar go for the Tyson Peanut Butter Burger which is one of their signature menu items, establishing the fact that most customers are receptive and adventurous enough to try out-of-the-norm flavours. Interestingly, the burger joint that's located at the hipster hangout – Orchard Central mall – was inspired by Man vs Food, an American reality TV series in which the host takes on food challenges.

Experimenting with outlandish toppings is an increasingly common way for burger businesses to stand out in today's highly competitive market. However, many are deciding to put the focus on simple flavours made with the best ingredients. The wildly successful London enterprise MEATliquor, known for epic queues that are managed by bouncers, serves adaptations on classics, like bacon burgers or green-chilli cheeseburgers. "We don't

mess around much with novelty ingredients," says founder Yianni Papoutsis. Papoutsis, who started out serving customers from a food truck in South London, says the city has seen "an explosion in burger restaurants over the past two years." It's all part of a gradual Americanisation of British taste that's made burgers the number one item found on the UK menus. Indeed, customers happily wait half an hour to get into Patty & Bun to order the signature Ari Gold,

which is not more than a simple cheeseburger on a brioche bun, while Honest Burger's rare breed aged beef patties come with little more than lettuce, pickles and tomato. Nick Andrews, founder of Hamburger Me, a London-based blog dedicated to the what else but burgers, adds that this is no flash-in-the-pan trend. "Burgers aren't going to go away in the UK. Take a look at the way they've developed in the US. It's been almost 100 years and they're still going strong!"

BURGER ESSENTIALS

HACHE GOURMET BURGERS

This restaurant located in the heart of Copenhagen is true to its name, serving no fewer than 18 different burgers ranging from the classic to the healthy (low carb and veggie) to the more unusual (pulled pork with coleslaw). Fun fact: the sleek space was created by the same firm who designed the city's most famous restaurant, Noma. hache.dk

BAREBURGER, NEW YORK

There's no denying the flavour-packed burgers from this micro-chain are decadent, but with eco-friendly ingredients and restaurants constructed out of sustainable materials, you'll still leave feeling like a saint. bareburger.com

BWB I BURGER VS WINGS + BAR, SINGAPORE

At this incredibly hip dining spot, American cuisine is served with a heart-thumping side of boxing. But have no fear. It's only BWB's innovative burgers that'll be knocking anyone's socks off. facebook.com/BWBSingapore

MEATLIQUOR, LONDON

At arguably London's most famous temple of the burger, the Dead Hippie—two mustard-fried patties, molten cheese and a "secret" sauce—remains the reigning champion of all time. meatliquor.com/london



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
The chilli burger is one of 18 different burgers offered at Hache Gourmet Burgers located in the heart of Copenhagen; the celebrated burgers at MEATliquor feature tender meat patties and firm homemade buns; at Byron, the burgers feature Scottish beef cooked medium and adorned with time-honoured toppings like lettuce, tomato, onion, bacon and cheese; homemade

rosemary-flavoured chips are the perfect accompaniment to the burgers, which are based on simple flavours and outstanding produce.

ABOVE
With a theatrical open kitchen and boxing theme – complete with boxing ring, punching bags and props – the hip, new BWB I burger VS wings + bar channels pure entertainment.