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CATEGORY PROFILE Flipping for burgers

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Whether it's down-home or gourmet, handmade or mass-produced, consumers love the ubiquitous burger.

By Stephanie Soong, contributing editor

Culinary trends come and go, but a burger is forever. With innovations in upscale burgers by renowned chefs, global expansion of U.S. quick-service burger chains and consumer love of the ubiquitous sandwich, the category is looking healthy overall.

"The burger segment will remain dynamic," says Nancy Kruse, president of menu-trends analyst The Kruse Co. "It has continued to evolve rapidly and has moved in many creative ways."

A recent report from Technomic showed that burger consumption is soaring: 85 percent of consumers eat burgers at least once per month, the Chicago-based research firm said. Demand for ground beef is also on the rise, says the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. In 2007, more than 5.1 billion pounds of bulk ground beef and patties were sold in foodservice - an increase of 3.5 percent over 2006.

A key driver is the specialty burger, as presented by chains like Greenwood Village, Colo.-based Red Robin and upmarket concepts from celebrity chefs like Bobby Flay. The demand is there: According to Technomic, nearly half of consumers want premium burgers such as Angus, sirloin or Kobe beef and are willing to pay more for them.

Burger love doesn't seem to be a strictly American phenomenon, either. Burger King recently announced plans to open new restaurants in Colombia, Hong Kong, Poland and Indonesia, and it returned to Japan after abandoning the market in 2001.

Fatburger, the California concept owned by Portland, Ore.-based Fog Cutter Capital Group, also is growing at a healthy clip overseas. With a new location in Macau, China, and plans for 10 more units in that country, the chain also is eyeing Dubai, Japan and Europe. "We had to re-educate the customer on what a good burger really is," says Elaine Patel, vice president of marketing, adding that Fatburger imports U.S. beef to China to ensure quality consistency. "We're really happy with China."

The burger may appear to be a simple little sandwich, but it has a big impact on the home front and beyond. "It truly is the cornerstone of the modern foodservice industry," Kruse says.

Game on

Beef has always reigned supreme as the No. 1 protein for burgers, but there's another protein in town - bison. While turkey and chicken are mainstays on most menus as alternatives to beef, it seems that bison is an up-and-coming option.

"We have seen a huge increase in retail and in foodservice," says Dave Carter, executive director of the National Bison Association. "People recognize that bison is a healthy meat because it's low in fat and high in protein."

With mainstream restaurants like Fuddruckers and Ted's Montana Grill featuring bison burgers more prominently, consumers have more opportunities to try game.

According to a recent Mintel survey on red meat, 30 percent of respondents have tried bison, which is second to venison (44 percent) among beef alternatives.

The beef industry, though, isn't worried that game, or even ground turkey, will ever dethrone beef. "Those are small percentages of meals consumed," says Jane Gibson, executive director of foodservice for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. "I don't think it's encroaching on the beef burger at this point."

But that's just fine with the bison industry. "We want to make sure that bison never becomes a commodity," Carter explains. "We don't see ourselves being the next beef."

New on the menu

That's super

Pittsburgh-based Eat'n Park's 1,086-calorie Black Angus Superburger boasts two 6-ounce patties of seasoned Black Angus beef swathed in melted cheese, lettuce, pickles and the chain's Sauce Supreme packed into a double-decker sesame seed bun.

Oh la la!

The Au Brie Burger a la Francais - made with ground sirloin, brie, potatoes, butter, cream and fresh rosemary - was created by the 11-year-old winner of Red Robin's annual kids' recipe contest. Fifty cents of every burger sale will benefit the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

Mini me

T.G.I. Friday's 3-Course Menu offers new mini burger appetizers: Friday Sliders (with lettuce, tomatoes, pickles and onions); Cheeseburger Sliders; and Chimichurri Sliders (with Provolone and garlic-herb sauce). An appetizer, entrée and dessert sells for \$12.99.

Chili out

This one might require extra napkins: Carl's Jr.'s Chili Cheese Burger, a charbroiled beef patty crowned with beef chili, American cheese, tomatoes, onions, pickles and mustard.

It comes in single, double and Six Dollar Burger versions for \$2.99, \$3.99 and \$4.79, respectively.

Q+A

Principled patties

"Sustainable," "locally produced" and "green" may be buzzwords among the general public, but the terms are old news for Burgerville. Since 1945, the Vancouver, Wash.-based chain has prided itself on using only locally produced food, following sustainable, socially responsible business practices and partnering with local suppliers. With 39 locations in the Pacific Northwest, a focus on antibiotic-free, pasture-raised beef, and double-digit same-store sales growth in 2006 and 2007, it looks like Burgerville is on to something. Alison Dennis, director of supply-chain management for Burgerville's parent company, shares more about the chain's philosophy.

What are some trends you're seeing in the burger segment?

Our customers want to know where their food is coming from. I think it's because of the bounty of natural resources we enjoy here. There's a pride of place in the Pacific Northwest, and we strive to make our menu reflect that pride.

What do you look for in a supplier?

We are committed to showcasing and serving fresh, locally produced, sustainable ingredients whenever possible. That includes our deep partnership with Country Natural Beef, a co-op of family-owned ranches that raises beef sustainably.

Given the high cost of natural beef, how does Burgerville balance supply costs with reasonable menu prices?

By working directly with the ranching families who produce our 100 percent natural beef, we understand the challenges facing family ranches today as well as the full value their product represents. The balance comes from helping our ranchers connect with guests who value knowing and trusting the source of their food and supporting our local food economy.

How else does Burgerville differentiate itself in a crowded marketplace?

Our commitment to sustainability comes from an authentic caring about people, the community and our agricultural partners. We think our guests care about these things too.

It's true

Nearly two-thirds of consumers indicate a strong preference toward customizing their burger through "build your own burger" options, according to Technomic.

Going the distance

Some companies come up with great marketing ideas, others have great marketing ideas thrust upon them. Such was the case with restaurant chain Burgerville in the Pacific Northwest. Last October, Brent Krebsbach and Paul LaFrance decided to ride their bikes 500 miles in four days to visit every one of the chain's 39 locations.

"It was an authentic relationship built out of some die-hard Burgerville fans," says Alison Dennis, director of supply-chain management for Burgerville's parent company. The chain held a drawing for prizes in conjunction with the event.

Engaging the customer is key to survival in an already crowded segment such as the burger category, experts maintain. "You need a noteworthy campaign," says Nancy Kruse, president of menu analyst The Kruse Co. She notes a recent Burger King campaign in which the chain removed the Whopper from its menu and captured patrons' reactions on hidden camera. "It gained huge publicity and lots of recognition," she says.

Then there is the "build your own burger" format. In 2006, Greenwood Village, Colo.-based Red Robin launched its "Next Gourmet Burger Kids' Recipe Contest." The winning burger is featured on Red Robin menus nationwide. By engaging customers in such promotions, "Red Robin has remained relevant to the communities we serve," says Kim McBee, vice president of marketing for the chain.

Applebee's followed suit with its "Big Burger Showdown," in which amateur chefs competed to create the most innovative burger, as judged by Food Network's Tyler Florence. "Consumers feel so comfortable with the burger that they're not afraid to use it as a jumping point for creating unusual versions," Kruse adds. "It's a smart marketing technique."

Let them eat burgers

Bobby's Burger Palace sounds like just another burger joint, but then again, what's in a name? Plenty, if the place is named after Bobby Flay, restaurateur extraordinaire and Food Network's grilling king. The celebrity chef, who recently inked deals to open three units of his high-end burger concept with five more in the pipeline, joins the ranks of other famous chefs, such as Laurent Tourondel and Hubert Keller, who are bringing fine burger dining to the masses with their own casual concepts.

"The introduction of these upmarket burger operations represents an ongoing trend toward the casualization of fine dining," says Nancy Kruse, president of menu-trends analyst The Kruse Co. "If they want to survive, they have to come down a couple of notches because fine dining is a slow-growth component of the restaurant industry."

That's not to say that these chefs are taking the word "fine" out of the dining equation altogether. Thomas Keller of French Laundry fame plans to launch Burgers and Half Bottles in California's Napa Valley, where the menu will feature burgers paired with wines. And Daniel Boulud's decadent \$79 DB Burger Royale - which includes ground sirloin stuffed with red-wine braised short rib meat, foie gras and fresh black truffles - continues to command a presence at his DB Bistro Moderne in New York.

While these fancy burger joints could never compete effectively with established brands like Red Robin, Kruse says, she notes that burgers are the ideal food for high-end chefs to connect with the masses, as they're a perennial favorite with diners. "[Upscale chefs] want to grab a piece of the mass-market action," she adds. "They want to hitch their wagon to a star to broaden customer appeal."

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