

Nick and Choose { NICK ALTSCHULLER }

CATTLE CALL

The hamburger enters its prime.



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IN THE 1940s, a casual California eatery with a yellow-and-red color scheme began serving cheap burgers to an eager public. With booming success came expansion and a wave of copycats looking to cash in on the model.

Of course I speak of In-N-Out Burger, the chain that's captured the hearts and stomachs of both chefs and the foodies who love them. Trying to find the key to its appeal, I asked my Facebook friends for their opinion—and subsequently received more comments in less time than anything I've ever posted, including links to my own work. (I in no way found that insulting.) As a coworker later put it, "Imagine if you went to a McDonald's and it was really clean, and people knew their shit." Loyalists cite the secret menu, which offers the allure of the esoteric, or the dedication to freshness. In fact, In-N-Out policy requires all new restaurants to be within 500 miles of a distribution center, which is why our area currently lacks an outpost.

But we do have Four Burgers. And Flat Patties. And b.good, and 5 Guys, and Boston Burger Company and other establishments capitalizing on the burger-culture cachet. Each offers a look into why the model is thriving, and why we can expect more iterations.

UBurger is a local chain with three locations in the city. Like In-N-Out, it offers a West Coast-style, flat patty burger made from fresh beef ground daily. And like its forebear, everything on the menu is ordained as free of fillers, additives and preservatives. Owned by Christians, all In-N-Out items arrive with Bible verses, but both companies seem to operate on the principle that eating of the sacred cow is some kind of cleansing act. However, digging into a plain hamburger (lettuce, tomatoes, onions, pickles, house spread) wasn't a revelatory experience. The burger (\$4.25) looks pristine, like the photographic lies used in Burger King adverts, but the product doesn't taste much different than a Whopper. The one distinguishing factor, the house spread, was dolloped in a nearly undetectable amount, but I assume it represents one of the atolls on the Thousand Island archipelago.

While U Burger illustrates the profitable benefits of fast and cheap, other chains appeal to gourmand sensibilities. The hamburger has recently become an object of playful worship for chefs and restaurateurs.

Icon Thomas Keller celebrated the anniversary of the French Laundry with In-N-Out. Says Beau Sturm, co-owner of Somerville's Trina's Starlite Lounge, "It's the benchmark for what everyone's doing," adding that their house burger is "absolutely ripping off the In-N-Out product."

Predictably, the hamburger craze struck years ago in New York, with restaurateur Danny Meyer creating an empire of Shake Shacks, and chefs like Daniel Boulud preparing burgers with price tags reading like traffic tickets. Last year, Boston heard rumors of a Shake Shack hitting the Common and witnessed the coming out of its own hamburger aristocracy (Back Bay Social Club's \$21 burger comes to mind).

Into that fold comes 5 Napkin, expanding from three locations in Manhattan with a new spot on Huntington Ave. "We're not just a burger place," co-owner Andy D'Amico says. "It's a concept and a restaurant." Appropriate, as takeout is geared to the corporate crowd. More stylized than the flip-and-fry flat patties, 5 Napkin's versions are 10-ounce pucks cooked to temperature. What's sacrificed in speed is made up for in juiciness, with giant dripping hamburgers (\$8.95) requiring a serpentine mandible technique. Conscientious suits may opt for a sixth napkin to tuck under their collars.

After cheap and hedonistic comes the last piece in the procedural: hip. Tasty Burger, by Fenway, embodies that attribute, right down to the remodeled garage location and retro signage. Here the hamburgers (\$4) come hot, salty and charred, as if straight from a backyard Weber. (There's also the In-N-Out-esque option to double the beef.) As you wash it down with a tall boy served by a bartender with funky facial hair, Arthur Fonzarelli gives a thumbs up from his pop-art print on the wall, assuring you this is cool.

When our region finally got a Sonic in 2009, there were three-hour backups on Route 16. The arrival of In-N-Out could create a flame of hysteria unseen since Krispy Kreme landed in Medford. Of course, that donut shop has closed. Flames die out. "For trendy foodstuffs are as roses, whose fair flower, being once display'd, doth fall that very hour," said Shakespeare through a mouthful of jellied eels. For burger fans, it's time to strike while the grill is hot.



Impersonals

LOST & FOUND

TO THE VERY HONEST AND ADMIRABLE RUNNERS IN THE

BACK BAY:

I decided to take advantage of the first nice weekend since I moved to Boston by going for a run down Comm. Ave. Two miles in, I realized my keys and Blackberry weren't in my pocket. I retraced my steps and found that a nice jogger had placed my keys on a bench! When I got home, I had a message from Verizon saying another kind soul had turned my phone in to the store. Just when I thought Boston was full of Massholes, two honest Bostonians proved me wrong.

New Bostonian Believer

To the family outside of the Prudential Center:

While you rushed across Belvidere Street, a family-size pack of water fell off your child's stroller. I gave you a smile of sympathy and understanding, as I know how hard it can be to grocery shop with a small child and no car. Perhaps you misunderstood, because you yelled back across the street, accusing me of laughing at you. Thanks for confirming what the rest of the country already thinks about Bostonians.

Midwestern Blonde

To the lovely massage therapist I met at Jacob Wirth:

You were taking your mom to a Celtics game. We talked over beers about business and you wrote down your phone number and e-mail address for me on a coaster... which, of course, I lost. I'd still like to do lunch. You were pretty awesome. Can we reconnect?

Wirth the Risk

Unrequited crush? Bad hair? Need to vent? Send your e-mails of love and spleen to impersonals@improper.com, or visit improper.com/impersonals.

Send your stories and suggestions to nick@improper.com.