

WHO HAS THE BEST PATTY?



Burger Battle

By Michael Nagrant

NOT SINCE KARL MARX AND MARTIN LUTHER HAVE MANIFESTOS been so hot. Though these days, the protesting masses aren't quite the blood-spattered, frothy-mouthed rabble they once were. Rather, like blogs, the green movement and plastic

bracelets etched with catchphrases, i.e. anything that was once relevant or cool, corporations have also co-opted the yearning declaration for their marketing purposes.

I know, because last Saturday I set out to find the ultimate griddled patty from new burger spots Epic Burger in the South Loop, Marc Burger in the Macy's food court and The Counter in Lakeview. During my quest, I was inundated by laundry-list rules and table-top tomes about the evils of trans-fats and frozen spuds, and the virtues of hand-formed antibiotic- and hormone-free grass-fed meat.

It turns out, most of these proclamations were a grand Shakespearean case of the lady, or in this case, the restaurant, protesting too much. I still subscribe to the idea that a great product rises above all and sells itself with no marketing necessary. If these burgers were really all that great, there would be no need for screeds.

Seemingly proving that rule, the best burger of the bunch, Marc Burger, from NYC top toque Marcus Samuelsson (also of C-House in the Affinia hotel) had the shortest dining-room declaration. There was a quick paragraph about the importance of serving "American grass-fed black angus ground beef" that was "humane, safe and high quality." Though, even as a regular meat eater, I'm pretty sure there's very little that's "humane" about raising cattle to slaughter them for lunch.

The paragraph was accompanied by a glamour shot of Samuelsson wearing a freshly pressed chef's coat that probably had never seen the griddle line at the Macy's food-counter kitchen. Instead a hair-netted posse of griddle jockeys flipped ten-to-twenty burgers at a time. While I waited for my burger, this crew seemed more attentive to their fellow co-workers than the meat, and I expected an overcooked patty.

Instead, I received a medium-rare coarsely ground patty featuring television-commercial-ready cross-hatched grill marks that dribbled peppery juices down my chin with each greedy bite. Either I'd lucked upon an especially attentive cook, or Samuelsson had found a way to create a paint-by-numbers training regimen that turned out a steady stream of perfect burgers. I might even say this particular burger was one of the best I've had in the city, though the patty was a little thin, making the ratio of beef to bun found in a Kuma's Corner burger still supreme. Marc Burger, though, offers a thicker "prime" burger option which might remedy that problem. What really put things over the top at Marc Burger were the crafty chef touches including housemade pickles, tangy cole slaw and spicy ketchup.

As the first stop on my tour and still blissfully ignorant of the juicy number that awaited at Macy's, I was actually pretty happy with the Epic burger. Though Epic's entry was more of a McDonald's-like case of the whole package working rather than superior individual elements. (Try eating a McD's cheeseburger without the bun, condiment and cheese—and you'll find a patty that manages to have less taste than raw tofu.) The toasted bun, the tangy "Epic" sauce, the grilled onion and the meat-to-bun ratio were a total package. What held Epic back was the dense, extremely fine grind and thinness of the patty. While it was seasoned well and juicy, it was also grilled to well-done, with nary a shade of pinkness.

The skin-on fries at Epic (clearly "French" and not "freedom," as Epic manifesto rule number four states "When made right, fries are délicieux") dotted with sea salt are some of the better potato sticks around. However, they were preternaturally crispy, almost in that experimental Burger King coating kind of way. If you like a soft fluffy interior, you probably won't like these.

At The Counter, a "concept" burger joint from California, the fries, including crispy sweet potato and fluffy McDonald's-style regular versions, were really the only thing I liked. My bun was untoasted, dense and dry. The burger was thick and cooked with a nice amount of pinkness, but lacked juiciness or seasoning. And, for those who fear standardized testing, the multi-faceted menu featuring a multiple-choice quiz to help you build your burger might be intimidating. This ordering process supposedly allows for 312,120-plus different burger combinations, but it also allows for a lot of doubt like, "If I choose a honey wheat bun, does that signal that I'm an old bastard who needs fiber?" or "Does wanting Dijon Balsamic glaze make my burger hardcore foodie enough?" If I were writing my own burger manifesto, rule number one would be, "Burger joint menus should never make you feel like you're taking a Cosmopolitan magazine 'sexual experience' quiz and leave you feeling inadequate."

Marc Burger, 7th Floor, 111 North State, (312)781-4884; Epic Burger, 517 South State, (312)913-1373; The Counter Burger, 666 West Diversey, (773)935-1995

TIP OF THE WEEK
RICHARD RUSSO

Screen legend Paul Newman has died. My very favorite actor, I'll forever be turned on by "The Hustler," made to feel infinitely cooler than I really am by "Cool Hand Luke," amused and tickled by "Butch Cassidy" and "The Sting" and bittersweetly moved by "Nobody's Fool." There are a number of powerful, specific lines Newman delivers in that last film, the loveliest being his response to the question, "Doesn't it bother you that you haven't done more with your life?" Newman's response, "Not often." Then a sly, subtle grin, "Now and then." It comes early in the film, and it's a doozy. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Richard Russo penned the novel from which that movie was made, as well as memorable works "The Risk Pool" and "Empire Falls" (the film version of which Newman starred in as well). Most recently, he offered "Bridge of Sighs," another strong, emotionally epic piece of work to his collection. My favorite, though, has always been "Nobody's Fool," its calming wash of upstate New York quaintness, the cranky, endearing humor, the portrait of a man finally facing his mistakes and quietly seeking redemption. Russo's a master at small-town America and its fascinating people, the secret and not-so-secret histories that make life worth looking back upon. Tonight, he discusses his work, and maybe, if we're lucky, we can get a few choice Newman anecdotes as well. Rest in peace, Sully. (Tom Lynch)

Richard Russo discusses his work October 2 at the Harold Washington Library Center, 400 South State, (312)747-4300, at 6pm. Free.

MUSEUMS

Chicago History Museum

1601 N. Clark, (312)642-4600. CHIC CHICAGO: COUTURE TREASURES FROM THE CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM presents garments that date from 1861-2004 and represent the most prominent couturiers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Through Jul 26. → CATHOLIC CHICAGO examines the history of the Catholic Church in Chicago. Nestled on the second floor of the Chicago History Museum, the "Catholic Chicago" exhibit graces with a superb twelve-foot painting of "Our Lady of Guadalupe," which was created on Mexican paper and done using gold leaf and pigmented dye. This large piece is flanked with an array of photos showing kids in Catholic school and finally footage from the International Eucharistic Congress of 1926—the first and largest pilgrimage event in America. Despite the airy feel of the building, these striking images alone could appear intimidating, particularly those not necessarily affiliated with the Catholicism. Despite this, expect to be greeted with an exhibit that intertwines the very roots of Chicago with the Catholic Church to a dizzying degree—creating a very personable approach to an incredibly broad topic. "Catholic Chicago" goes beyond the common facts and pertinent Catholic local figures; instead, the exhibit once again attempts to engross the audience—going so far as to feature a short film on Catholic school in front of two school desks (from a real Catholic school mind you), and offers a replica of the church experience, complete with pews, altar and piped-in music from different services and congregations. Perhaps most telling is that the exhibit strives to exemplify the diverse notions of what it means to be Catholic by covering a number of denominations and cultures (theres an audio tour in both Spanish and Polish). Because of this widespread approach, "Catholic Chicago" is approachable by not only those who are themselves Catholic but really for anyone curious about both the religion and how it guides a person's way of life. (Thomas Barbee) Ongoing. Hours: Mon-Wed 9:30am-4:30pm, Thu 9:30-8pm, Fri-Sat 9:30-4:30pm, Sun noon-5pm. Fees: \$12; \$10 seniors 65+ and students 13-22 w/ID. Members and children under 12 free. Mon free.

Field Museum

1400 S. Lake Shore (at Roosevelt), (312)922-9410. → NATURE UNLEASHED. The Field Museum's "Nature Unleashed" opens with a tree cracked in half and stripped of bark. It is just one of many extraordinary visuals from the planet's most destructive natural phenomenon: earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes, hurricanes and tornados. The exhibit juxtaposes Earth's callous meteorological and seismic forces with the poignant human stories affected by its disasters. Visuals mimic the colossal power of nature while smaller artifacts, such as handwritten letters from Hurricane Katrina survivors, tug at heartstrings. The recorded sounds of seismic activity (alien-like pops and scrapes) lend the space an omnipresent sense of doom, as if at any moment the floor might rupture. The exhibit's most impressive offering is the invention of stormchaser Tim Samaras, a digital recording device which allows guests to stand in a 360-degree video-viewing area that places them in an approaching tornado's path. For several heart-stopping seconds, visitors are encircled by the eye of the storm. (Laura Hawbaker) Through Jan 4. Hours: Daily 9am-5pm. Fees: \$12 adults, \$7 children 4-11, \$7 students & seniors. With Chicago ID: \$10, \$6 children, \$7 students & seniors.