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— TURNS OUT, FIVE GUYS GOT NOTHING ON WENDY

Guy Talk

By Michael Nagrant

HOW MANY GUYS DOES IT TAKE TO MAKE A GREAT BURGER? Based on my recent experience at Five Guys in Oak Park, it's definitely more than five. Of course, quantity probably doesn't

matter, as McDonald's Corporation employs hundreds of thousands of people and they've yet to get it right.

Actually, the number of folks it takes to make a great burger probably isn't as philosophical a question as how many licks it takes to get to the center of a Tootsie Roll pop. There's no doubt in my mind the best fast-food burger available in Chicago these days can be found at Marc Burger in the food court at Macy's on State, and that burger was invented by one man, chef Marcus Samuelsson (C-House).

So what's wrong with the Five Guys patty? It all starts with cooks who use spatulas and grill presses to smash the life out of the beef. Once grilled, these well-done juiceless pucks look like Wile E. Coyote after one too many anvils to the head. While struggling under the weight of the press, the patties never really get griddled, but instead steam in their own juices.

You also wonder why a place that cooks patties to order makes their burgers well done, but at Five Guys, it's not really a secret. Their corporate Web site answer is "By cooking all of our burgers juicy and well done we are able to achieve two goals: Insure a consistent product [and] Meet or exceed health code standards for ground beef."

Translation: we don't trust our training programs or our grill cooks to do a good job, so instead, we've decided that cooking the living moo out everything we serve is the only way to succeed.

I'd give them slack on this point, but the high-volume Marc Burger grill manned by everyday hairnetted joes somehow manages to turn out perfect, juicy medium-pink beauties one burger at a time and have so for a while.

Lest you think this is the sound of one man typing, one of my good friends, a non-food-writing burger aficionado, suggested that the Wendy's double is better than the Five Guys burger. I was skeptical, but as I reflected on it, he's right. The Wendy's burger (also fresh, never frozen beef just like Five Guys) sports discernible grill marks, good seasoning and a flame-broiled taste. The dense grayish mass at Five Guys tasted as if it hadn't come within ten feet of a saltshaker.

Even the squishy sesame-seed bun here, which disintegrates under a dollop of mayo and goeey cheese, isn't much more inspiring than the patties. If I've learned anything eating hundreds of burgers in my lifetime, the greatest buns are usually of the potato variety and are best when toasted and topped with a touch of butter, as at local chain Culvers.

The skin-on fries at Five Guys are decent (though much better ones are available at Hot Doug's or Susie's in Irving Park), but at \$2.59 for a "regular" portion they're kind of pricey. Five Guys would be better off cutting the portion size and the price in half.

This all being said, the real central question of Five Guys is not how many folks it takes to make a great burger, but rather, how can so many well-respected news outlets can be so hoodwinked into loving it?

Where some burger joints might hang framed prints of scary clowns or fat purple blobs, Five Guys has culled over twenty years of good reviews and posted mini-billboard-style excerpted quotes from the Atlantic City Weekly to the New York Daily News. On one wall, you'll find a decade or so of successive reprints of the Zagat guide fawning over Five Guys.

It could be that all of these signs work as a form of mind control, but I suspect Five Guys' success is actually a function of cheap nostalgia and relatively sad competition. Up against the garbage served by mega chains, save Wendy's, the flawed Five Guys burger is much better.

More than anything though, Five Guys is also capitalizing on the East Coast's and Midwest's yearning for the glorious burgers of West Coast chain In-N-Out. Absent their goeey animal-style patties, we settle for second best.

One thing Five Guys has going for it is crispy bacon and oozy cheese and a menu of condiments (any and all free with your burger purchase) that makes the salad bar selection at Whole Foods jealous (golden-fried onions are best). But this is just lipstick (on a cow?). And as we learned last November, when you put lipstick on something, all you end up with is a rifle-toting civil-liberty-revoking hockey mom who can see Russia from her backyard.

Five Guys is located at 1115 Lake Street, Oak Park, and at 2140 North Clybourn in Chicago.

words

— LOOSE LEAF TEA LOFT LOVES ITS BOOKS



Hang Loose

NAILED FIRMLY TO ALMOST TURQUOISE WALLS are box-shelves made of unfinished wood that hold pots, moleskin journals and books ranging from Sartre to "House of Leaves." A tranquil mood is set by slow music playing overhead, where far from

bright lights shine from up above. The place: the Loose Leaf Tea Loft.

The Loft is set up by Michelle Wu and Conor Pewarski, Harvard and Yale graduates who, on a brave whim, decided to set up the tea joint in Irving Park after a post-graduation return to Chicago. "We decided to open a tea shop in July 2008, drove all our things in a U-Haul from Boston to Chicago, found a few spaces on Craigslist, and fell in love with this corner immediately," Wu says. "Then, with help from family and friends, we repainted the entire space and collected wine crates for the wall display. We tasted hundreds of teas to pick our thirty-six for the menu. We filed for restaurant licenses and business permits from the city."

After about three and a half months from conception to their actual opening, Wu and Pewarski have established a space with a relaxing atmosphere with character to boot. "Our general mission is to promote health and happiness through balance and community," Pewarski says. "Tea is the perfect way to do that, because a key ingredient is time—time for the leaves to steep, time for conversation. We also wanted to create an intimate space that the community feels free to use for their own artistic, social and intellectual gatherings—poetry readings, musical performances, open mic nights, writing workshops, game nights. We love it when someone comes to us with an idea for an event that they'd like to host at the shop."

With hopes of attracting delightful crowds, Wu and Pewarski have added to the Loft all the necessary tools for a nurturing atmosphere. "Hoping to create an atmosphere of reading, writing and conversation, we decided to sell notebooks along with tea and put all our favorite books up on the wall for decoration and use. That gave us the name of the shop: Loose Leaf Tea Loft, for loose leaf tea and loose leaf paper. Then with our favorite books in the wine crates, it just made sense to connect the teas with our sources of inspiration," Wu says. And the teas' names are no joke, either. "Each tea is named after a different literary character that has some trait or connection with the tea, and almost all the characters come from a book in the shop. For instance, Jack Kerouac's character in 'On the Road' gave us our Sal's Paradise tea, sharp ginger with tangy orange freshness. Miss Scarlett's Sweetest is a white tea with playful peaches and spunky tangerine, reminiscent of Georgia and southern society in 'Gone with the Wind.' And of course, our Barack's AudaciTea promises to 'change the way you think of oolong with the flavor of hopeful hazelnut.'" (*Micah McCrary*)

Loose Leaf Tea Loft, 4229 North Lincoln, looseleaftealoft.com

READINGS

FRI/13

→ Eugene Mirman

The comedian, actor and author reads from "The Will to Whatever: A Guide to Modern Life." *The Book Cellar, 4736 N. Lincoln, (773)293-2665. 7pm. Free.*

The Mentalist's Mental Cabinet of Vengeance!

A reading and book party featuring Rikki Ducornet, August Kleinzahler, Robyn Schiff, Ish Klein and more. *Stop Smiling Storefront, 1371 N. Milwaukee, (773)342-1124. 8pm. Free.*

No Thousands: A Small Press Reading

With Eric Baus, Russell Dillon, Claire Donato, Joshua Harmon and more. *Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western, (773)276-3600. 6pm. Free.*

SUN/15

Lesbian Poetry Collection

Featuring readings by Achy Obejas, Ching-In Chen, Nickole Brown and more. *Women and Children First Bookstore, 5233 N. Clark, (773)769-9299. 4:30pm. Free.*

The Burning Chair Readings

With Carrie Olivia Adams, Ben Doller, Kathleen Jesme, Forrest Gander, Matt Hart, Brenda Hillman, Alex Lemon, Barbara Maloutas and more. *Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western, (773)276-3600. 6pm. Free.*

→ Feedback! Notes on Music

A reading featuring Sam Weller and John McNally. *Tantrum, 1023 S. State, (312) 939-9160. 8pm. Free.*

→ Joel Craig, Abraham Smith, William Hillman

A reading presented by MAKE Literary Productions, Action Books, ACM and the Windy City Story Slam. *Hideout, 1354 W. Wabansia, (773)227-4433. 8pm. \$7.*

THU/12