



diningout

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A grass-fed beef burger with salt and pepper seasoning, topped with bacon and cheddar on a split-top egg butter bun is a great choice at Butcher & the Burger. | RICHARD A. CHAPMAN-SUN-TIMES



When's the last time you ordered a Whopper, medium-rare? Despite what Burger King says, there are some things you can't have your way. But you do expect some extra care from a "Mom and Pop" burger spot. Upholding that ideal, is Butcher & The Burger, a new joint in Lincoln Park.

Despite expecting a little special treatment from local burger joints (we've seen a boom of them in Chicago recently), most of the new guys have more in common with McDonald's than the corner diner. You don't get to choose your doneness, and most of the patties are served medium-well to well-done and have a pre-formed feel.

With this in mind, when the woman behind the counter at Butcher & The Burger asks me how I'd like my burger cooked, I stare at her for about 10 seconds? When I regain my senses, even though I really want medium-rare, some conditioned reflex has me stammering "medium." When I fully realize I actually have a choice, I apologize and change my order to medium-rare. I'm pretty sure the cashier thinks I'm on drugs.

But embarrassment and dishonor is worth the juicy, pink, grass-fed patty rubbed with salt and pepper topped with thick-cut Benton's southern bacon and all coddled in a buttery pillow-top bun soon delivered to my table. It's probably one of the top 10 burgers I've had in the last few years (though admittedly it's probably number 10 of 10). Featuring a nice touch of minerality, it isn't a change-your-life burger like the soft/ crispy patties dripping with tallow fresh from the griddle at Edzo's. I suspect part of this is that Butcher & Burger doesn't grind their meat in-house like Edzo's. (Owner Josh Woodward, who spends a great deal of time chatting up the front of the house stops by and confirms this fact when I ask.)

Also, consistency being key, on my next visit I order the house beef-blend burger, mixed with Chicago Style Steak-house spice (which I'm now dubbing eau de Gene & Georgetown); it's delivered medium-well with only a touch of pink. So while I appreciate the offer to grill to my desires, the ability to meet that demand still needs some work.

Doneness is only one of the many options on offer: If you have any kind of anxiety about making choices in life, you better double up on your Xanax when you visit Butcher & the Burger: Here you get to choose everything: your patty — beef, pork, elk, lentil-brown rice, Portobello, shrimp and more; your bun — whole wheat (a little dry), croissant (too wimpy to stand up to the drippy burgers), pretzel (decent, but not as good as . . .) the split-top buttery egg (the pillow — the dream); your spice blend; luxury toppings (foie gras and truffle mayo, anyone?); and a host of free condiments.

Having worked my way through a righteous briny shrimp burger slathered in deeply savory "Umami Spice" (ginger, garlic, scallion and sweet soy sauce) and a slightly dry Elk Burger (in addition to the burgers mentioned above), I have a moment of paralysis on my third visit. Woodward, who's clearly seen his face of fear before, swoops in and directs me to a medium-rare local La Pryor Farms (Ottawa, Ill.) pork burger mixed with curry, coconut and honey spice on a split-top egg bun with a touch of wasabi mayo. Though it sounds like a bad 1980s fusion dish — the kind of thing for which Don Johnson would have rolled up his linen sleeves before eating on an episode of "Miami Vice" — I take Woodward's advice.

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