

A burger isn't just a burger

By Susan Wood

BEAVER CREEK – One of the most traditional foods at a ski area may be the most memorable when it breaks tradition.

Much of the hamburger's success is contingent on a number of factors ranging from the ingredients to the side dishes and even the value of the meal.

Take a recent Beaver Creek Food + Wine Festival après ski party, where celebrity chefs lined up their concoctions on the patio of the Park Hyatt. While the perfect complement – beer, was flowing from Stella and Leffe Belgium taps, Texas grill master Tim Love and BRAVO's Top Chef Spike Mendelsohn wowed hundreds of hungry party attendees with their versions of the ultimate American staple that dates back thousands of years to the ancient Egyptians.



Burgers are anything but ordinary at the Beaver Creek Food + Wine event. Photos/Kathryn Reed

So what are their secrets?

“There are no secrets except good meat and good salt,” Love said. “And you can't beat a good bacon cheeseburger.”

He made the simple ensemble on the grill, a place this immensely confident chef is very comfortable. Even his three adolescent children have become grill masters.

After sampling an assortment at the après ski party and other Tahoe ski resort burgers, I couldn't have agreed more with Love's assessment. I do like something I can't get everywhere.

His special sauce, tomato and roasted red pepper didn't overpower the meat.

Love seemed to relish the heated challenge. He and Mendelsohn are quite comfortable in the spotlight, even when they're under fire.

For Love, it was the Food Network challenge in which he was criticized by the judges for "just making a salad" with kale as an ingredient, then turning around and using it again. He brushed off the criticism and told *Lake Tahoe News* he was "happy to be beating" other cooks in Iron Chef challenges.

For Mendelsohn, his brush with another panel of judges came when he plated his dishes with another chef, "his bro." He was eliminated on that round, but he also told *LTN* he was proud of what he served and thought the maneuver was legal.

Television competitions aside, the two top chefs ran a no-holds-barred contest of their best burgers and the partygoers were more than happy to take part.

"When he cooks, he absolutely has it down. And it doesn't hurt that he's cute," said Stephanie Eubanks of Orange, as her husband stood close by. Eubanks attended the Food + Wine magazine event the previous year as well.

They weren't the only ones thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Even the après ski party Brendan McKinney band appreciated the crowd's enthusiasm, and the foursome was more than happy to stay longer than scheduled.

Suzie Reid and Holly Douple of Centerville, Ohio, try to make it to the event every year.

As she roamed between the beer taps and the grills, Douple said she likes to follow Love because “he’s got attitude,” and it comes across in his dishes.

“We stalk the chefs at the ‘meet and greet’,” Reid said, giggling.

Celebrity chefs have become the new sex symbol. They may have found another way to a woman’s heart.

Dressed in blue jeans and a hoodie, Mendelsohn added a little flirtation to the diners sampling his wild boar burgers. The small burgers were topped with smoked cheddar, barbecue sauce, pickles and chipotle because the rebel chef “likes heat.”

As it turned out, these celeb chefs weren’t the only ones dishing up their competitive best.

Beaver Creek Chophouse Executive Chef Jay McCarthy put on his creative hat for a grilled ensemble worth returning for more. He combined pickled red onions, rosemary, pesto and roasted garlic for a magnificent explosion of flavor on his lamb sliders. Grab the French fries in the cones, and it’s burger heaven.

McCarthy appeared competitive and cooperative.

As a host chef to the visiting celebs, he noted how enjoyable it was to share the stage and limelight. He and Mendelsohn chatted at length at the festival’s “meet and greet” event and insisted “you’ll like the buns I brought out.”

He did let *Lake Tahoe News* in on a little secret of the perfect bun.

“There’s a little extra sugar in them, so they melt in your mouth,” he said.

Sometimes sharing is the name of the game.

“This whole event is fun. We’re a small town, and we all know each other,” Black Diamond Bistro head chef Andy Buechl said of his fellow restaurateur chefs at the “meet and greet.”

Park Hyatt sous chef Nathan Trap agreed on the opinion of the event involving six local restaurants. Normally, the competition is high in a tourist-rich environment.

“It’s fun to work with all the chefs. We’ve been sharing the kitchen and agreeing on what to serve,” Trapp said, as servers ran in and out of the busy kitchen.

Perhaps, Lake Tahoe ski resorts could follow the example – especially since three of the mountains are owned by the same company, Vail Resorts.

Tasting Tahoe burgers

In this season’s burger sampling, it was the independent Sierra-at-Tahoe smokehouse burger that tantalized my taste buds and wallet the most.

- Sierra’s 360 Smokehouse at the Grand View grill at the resort’s summit serves up a burger as superior as the view. The bacon burger, which was remarkably seared on the edges from the smoker, is scrumptious, spicy and tangy. And for \$14.99, it comes with a choice of side dish. I chose the sweet potato fries because they’re always fantastic at Sierra. To think I couldn’t even finish the two dishes and really wanted to.

- For those really watching a budget, the family-friendly Aspen Lounge at Sierra’s base lodge provides a burger bar where the diner chooses the assortment to put on a \$7 cheeseburger. French fries are a mere \$3. Vegetarians may opt for a grilled cheese for \$5. The bread is made locally. The burger fixings are vast, including: lettuce, grated cheese,

peppers, tomatoes, onions and various sauces such as teriyaki, barbecue, mustard, ketchup and mayonnaise. One can also add grilled mushrooms, onions and even bacon for \$1. The place is an ideal inexpensive option. And, I love the toasted bun around the half-pound burger.

- For a really big burger, Vail introduced the Epic burger at its fleet of resorts a few years ago. At Lake Tahoe, a hungry diner may order it at Kirkwood, Northstar and Heavenly. I chose the latter at the top of the tram restaurant. The double patty priced at \$12.95 offers a diner a full meal, but at least mine was a little on the messy side. Of course, judging from Carl's Junior burger joint commercials – some may prefer that. Along those lines, the Epic burger sounds like a Big Mac in terms of ingredients except for the bread – two all-beef patties, special (Thousand Island) sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions on a (special) bun.

- I actually enjoyed the Zephyr burger more at Northstar's new mid-mountain Zephyr Lodge. It wasn't wet, so the bun wasn't soggy. The pepper jack cheese, along with the certified Angus beef that Vail uses, represents a great combo. The aioli adds to the flavor-filled burger, and the onion brings out a welcome crunch on every bite.

- In the category of "it's all about the meat," I thoroughly relished Sugar Bowl's \$11 cheeseburger made with Painted Hills beef at the Belt Room Bar. The meat's name comes from ranching families in Wheeler County, Ore., who agreed to take the initiative to produce better quality beef. There are no added hormones, antibiotics, and the cows are pasture-raised on a vegetarian diet. This care reflects in the taste of the burger, which I completely finished. I received a generous portion of French fries with it and garnished the burger with Swiss cheese, tomato, lettuce and a dash of ketchup. The perfect complement was Sugar Bowl's Pale Ale, which the waitress declared is "popular." I could see why. (Note: she didn't however know what the significance of the Painted Hills

meat was.) Ignorance aside, the Belt Room Bar provides an ideal atmosphere for those wanting to sit inside or out of the village main lodge. Warm and satisfied, I almost fell asleep in the sun.

- Kirkwood provides a good version of its outside-grilled burger at the backside of the ski resort. The Out Mountain cheeseburger at the snack shop cabin near the Sunrise chairlift runs \$10.25 and comes with accessories the diner may add on. I opted for my mainstay tomato and lettuce and threw on barbecue sauce for good measure. The toasted bun is definitely a nice touch but the burger was a tad overdone.

A burger's past

- 1209: Mongolian Emperor Genghis Khan dined on ground meat when his cavalry traveled.

- 1600s: Ships from the German port of Hamburg began returning with Russian steak tartar.

- 1802: The Oxford English dictionary defined hamburg steak as salt beef.

- 1900: Louis Lassen of Louis Lunch in New Haven, Conn., laid claim to the invention of the hamburger when he ground up lean beef, broiled it and served it between toast.

- 1921: Real estate insurance agent Edgar Waldo "Billy" Ingram teams up with cook Walter Anderson to open the first White Castle hamburger stand in Wichita, Kan. The small burgers were served off the grill with a lot of onion and soft yeast buns. They sold for 5 cents each

- Today, millions of restaurants, burger joints and fast-food stands provide the hand-to-mouth dish.

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