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BURGER DIGEST

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SIDE EFFECTS: MAKING A BURGER A MEAL

By Scott Hume

The burger boom's first phase came when chefs and consumers realized a burger could be more than a boring drive-in staple: It could be anything imaginable. The rise of craft beers shaped the boom's second phase as burgers, beers and bourbons became a powerful triumvirate for the rising demographic that would be called millennials.

I think we're in a third stage of burgers' 20-year ascendency. This evolutionary stop recognizes that burgers are best as part of a meal, where all elements are important. Quality burger, quality beverage…and quality sides beyond a basket of fries. Operators are beginning to give creative spins to side dishes, just as they have done with burgers, for two good reasons: Consumers will order interesting sides and will pay a fair price for them.

In many burger bars, sides are priced at upwards of half the price of a burger. That means alluring $6 and $7 sides—not just loaded fries but vegetable and fruit side dishes--can work on many menus. Researcher Technomic finds that 53% of diners order a side dish on all or most restaurant visits, compared with 39% ordering an appetizer.

Keep in mind, too, that most younger diners are most interested in and exploratory about vegetable dishes than were their parents. That is pushing vegetables and grains to the center of the plate. Consider that AL's Place in San Francisco, named Best New Restaurant of 2015 by Bon Appétit, groups grilled trout, smoked brisket and hangar steak under "Sides" on its menu. New thinking.

For more burger trends and insights click here!

HERE ARE SOME USEFUL EXAMPLES OF MORE THINKING INVOLVING SIDES THAT ARE SELLING NOW ON BURGER BAR MENUS:

- Have a grill? Grilled vegetables can pair wonderfully with burgers. Jeff Dichter, owner of top Montreal burger bar m:brgr, tells me that grilled asparagus and grilled mushrooms sold well as soon as they went on the menu, even priced at $7 and $8.75 respectively. Phil's Icehouse in Austin, Texas, has had success with battered-and-fried green beans as a replacement for regular fries.
- Victory Burger In Oakland, Calif., keeps the fryer busy with sides that include fries, beer-battered onion rings, sweet fried plantains, tempura pickled vegetables and a $7.75 Mixed Fry Basket with it all. There's also a "Fries of the Week" special. Recent dishes have been Plantain & Yucca Chips; Yucca Frites with capers and chimichurri mayo; and a Winter Root Fry Up (carrots, fry-cut rutabaga and garnet yams mixed with hand-cut fries and topped with chipotle mayo and Parmesan).
- Another Canadian burger bar, The Burg in Edmonton, Alberta, gives diners a choice of traditional or more "nouveau" sides with any burger order: fries, house-made potato chips, coleslaw, devilled eggs (two), or house-cured bacon bourbon beans. But for a $3.75 upcharge those options include yam fries, onion rings, mac 'n' cheese balls (four), house salad, Caesar salad or country-style tomato soup. All this is part of the reconsideration of burgers as parts of a complete meal.
- Another burger joint that's offering a wide variety of reasonably priced side options is Farmhaus Burger in Atlanta. "Haus-cut" Russet fries with sea salt and cracked pepper are $2.25, but go 50¢ more and there's house feta dipping sauce with the fries. Other choices are sweet potato tots ($3.50) buttermilk onion rings ($3), red bean chili ($3) or fried pickles with buttermilk ranch ($3.50), all house-made.
- House-made pickles rank among the top 20 hottest food trends for 2016, according to the National Restaurant Association's annual "What's Hot?" list. Chomp Kitchen & Drink in Warren, R.I., is another burger bar that's pickling cukes for the deep-fried "Frickles" it offers with ranch sauce as a side. Chef Mario Batali offers a basket of "Fried & Not" pickles at his B&B Burger & Beer in Las Vegas. Luxe Burger Bar in Providence, R.I., is frying up Frickles, too.
- But you don't have be into pickling to take advantage of the trend. The healthy-eating Bareburger chain offers dill, spicy and sweet pickles on the side, along with a zippy wasabi carrot slaw. The healthful-eating trend is evident in the organic brussels sprouts with roasted chestnut-and bacon butter served at the Chalk Valley burger bar in Southampton, England. And Yeah! Burger in Atlanta last fall had as it Side of the Month an Organic Quinoa Bowl made with organic butternut squash, organic white quinoa, organic kale, and organic pumpkin seeds tossed with house-made organic sherry vinaigrette dressing.
- For January 2016, Yeah! Burger's special side is golden brown potato tots made with organic potatoes and organic Cheddar. Tots are hot with young diners and are a great place to start when you're looking at upgrading sides. The Johnny Rockets chain recently added Smoky Cheddar Pulled Pork Tots to its menu, giving potato nuggets the loaded-fries treatment. Like so many others, that's a side dish worth trying on the menu.

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CALIFORNIA VEGGIE BURGER W/AVOCADO CHILI BUTTER

PORTION COST: $ 1.08 | SUGGESTED MENU PRICE: $ 4.50 | PROFIT: $ 3.42

INGREDIENTS

½ C	Long-grain rice, cooked
2 packets	Green tea
1 ½ C	Black beans, canned
1 C	Fresh mushrooms, sliced
1 C	Cabbage & carrot coleslaw mix
1 ½ tsp	Chopped garlic
¼ tsp	Crushed red pepper flakes
¾ C	Cornmeal
2	Avocado, skin and pit removed
1 ½ Tbsp	Chili powder, mild
2 Tbsp	Cilantro, chopped fresh
¼ C	Roasted, unsalted sunflower seeds
2 Tbsp	Lime juice
8	Romaine lettuce leaves
1	Tomato, cut into 8 slices
16 slices	Sourdough bread, toasted

PREPARATION

Prepare rice according to package directions. CCP: Cook to minimum internal temperature of ≥135°F held for 15 seconds and maintain at this temperature until further use. Pulse cooked rice, black beans, the contents of the green tea packets, mushrooms, coleslaw mix, chopped garlic, soy sauce and crushed red pepper flakes until well blended. Place in a mixing bowl. Stir in cornmeal until well blended.

On a preheated flat top place #10 scoop of burger mix and flatten with a spatula. Cook about 4-5 minutes, then flip and continue to cook another 4-5 minutes. CCP: Cook to minimum internal temperature of ≥ 165°F held for 15 seconds. Maintain at an internal temperature of ≥135°F prior to service. For avocado chili butter: Place avocado, chili powder, sunflower seeds, and lime juice in a clean food processor and mix until smooth. CCP: Hold at an internal temperature of ≤41°F prior to service.

To serve, place one romaine leaf on top of a toasted piece of sourdough bread. Top with burger and tomato slice. Place 2 Tbsp of avocado butter in a small dish on the side. Garnish with cilantro leaf and sunflower seeds.

Click here to find this recipe and more!

CHICKEN GETS BURGER-STYLE EXTRAVAGANCE

Chicken sandwiches finally are being let into the burger bar "club." That acceptance is shown in chicken beginning to get the extravagant builds that previously was reserved for beef burgers. Certainly, chicken sandwiches have been on burger bar menus for years. Researcher Mintel says 2010 was the tipping point when chicken sandwiches passed burgers in QSR menu appearances. But while burger bars have been seeking to outdo each other with multi-ingredient toppings on beef or other red-meat burgers, chicken sandwiches have had to make do with lettuce, tomato and mayo.

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FIVE BURGER TRENDS FOR 2016

My prediction for 2015 was for a Year of the Cheeseburger, meaning renewed popularity for classic, simple, top-quality burgers, and I think that has been one of this year's most prominent narratives. OK, the forecast for more burger/coffee pairings may not have been prescient, but expectations that in-house pickling, breakfast burgers and non-meat burgers would be more important worked out well enough. My predictions for 2016 spring from a conviction that burger bars are evolving and maturing.

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