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Turkey Burgers Don't Count



Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

THE JUDGES Burger of the Month Club members decide where to place Zaitzeff, a financial district storefront, in their rankings.

By JODI RUDOREN
Published: May 5, 2009

ONE by one they approached the counter at Zaitzeff, a storefront in New York's financial district, and repeated the words like a mantra. Half-pound sirloin burger. Bacon. Cheddar.

Multimedia



Interactive Feature
Ten of the Burgers

None of the seven men, still in neckties from the workday, dared order a turkey burger (\$8.50 on the chalkboard menu). Nobody got the sliders (\$12.50 for three). Not one request for Kobe (\$9.75 for a quarter-pounder, \$15.50 for a half).

"If anybody didn't order a half," Brett Weiss told the beefy guy taking it all down on a restaurant pad, "make them a half-pound anyway."

Mr. Weiss, 33, operations manager for a software company, is the

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Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

45 BURGERS, 46 BURGERS, 47 BURGERS ... The club meets monthly; fries, shakes, buns and service are ranked, too.

founder and de facto leader of the Burger of the Month Club, or BOTM (which he and his friends pronounce “bottom”). One Monday a month for the last four years, they have sampled a burger — bacon-cheddar whenever available — at a different New York restaurant.

They do not just eat the burgers, they rank them, compiling the averages on a Web site, [burgerrankings.com](#), and competing through the year to see whose restaurant choice will wind up as the best-loved burger (winner gets ... nothing).

“Certain people like a steak-type burger, certain people like something thinner,” Mr. Weiss noted. “Do you rank a burger based on, ‘My friend came in from out of town, where should I take him?’ Versus, ‘If I had all 45 burgers in front of me sitting on a table, which one would I eat?’ That’s the healthy debate.”

Healthy, it’s not. In fact, one member is on injured reserve due to cholesterol.

(The club is capped at eight because that seems like the maximum one can reasonably expect to get seated at a restaurant; when new members join, they are expected to catch up by eating, and ranking, whatever burgers they have missed.)

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In his 2006 application for admission, Jed Weiss, 34 — no relation to Brett or his older brother, Darren, 36, also a founding member — proclaimed, “Burgers to me are an art.”

“Vegetables are to be eaten by rabbits and liberals,” wrote Mr. Weiss, a lawyer who lives on the Upper West Side, “and the only form they should take is the fourth ingredient in a condiment.”

(Another would-be member, Dave Powers, submitted a résumé, on which he bragged about indoctrinating his son in the Way of the Burger; perfecting his palate over 15 years in Washington, D.C., Iowa and Charlottesville, Va.; and, back in the late 1970’s, beating Eric Vopova at a middle school contest by eating “16 sliders in 5 minutes under the bleachers” without getting sick. Mr. Powers was accepted but quit when he moved to Oregon.)

BOTM began in the summer of 2005, when Adam Beckerman, 32, called up Brett Weiss and said, “Let’s go eat the world’s biggest burger.”

“Adam, when we were younger and he was still single, used to call me all the time and be like, ‘Let’s do ... ’ and he didn’t have to finish the sentence because I’d say yes,” Mr. Weiss explained.

At the time, the world’s biggest burger was a 15-pounder on offer at Denny’s Beer Barrel Pub in Clearfield, Pa., about a four-hour drive from New York. Mr. Beckerman and Mr. Weiss grabbed two other hungry guys, found a raggedy golf course nearby and made a day of it: They even printed commemorative “Best Day Ever” golf balls with a burger and a golf tee.

Then they came home and started eating half-pounders.

Members take turns picking burger destinations, which must be accessible by subway. Most do online research as well as a taste test, since a bad pick can bring humiliation. Once each has picked, whoever picked the group’s favorites gets to pick a second time — this is known as the playoffs — and the best of those wins the year.

(The 2008 crown is in dispute: Primehouse had the year’s top burger, but it was picked by Brett Weiss, who some believe back-doored his way into the playoffs upon Mr. Powers’s departure.)

At first, each member rated each place -2 to +4 on each of 13 factors, including cheese, bun, manageability, fries, shake, service and décor. That got replaced by an A-F report card-style scale in eight categories, including taste, value and returnability. By the end of the first year, the group had scratched all that and just ranked each burger against all the other burgers, constantly refining their individual and collective lists, which Brett Weiss meticulously compiles.

“We came down to the point, why are we ranking service, why are we ranking décor, why are we ranking the bun and the fries when they really have nothing to do with the burger?” Mr. Weiss explained. “I think at this point if you put us on a picnic table in the middle of Central Park and brought us the burger, I think we’d all be happy.”

The Top 10 is a mix of usual suspects — like Peter Luger; Donovan’s Pub in Queens; and Burger Joint at Le Parker Meridien — and some surprises, like Genesis Bar & Restaurant on the Upper East Side and City Hall, a corporate lunch spot better known for its raw bar.

(J. G. Melon, a perennial on best-burger lists, is stuck around No. 20, revealing a split in the group: it is some members’ absolute favorite, but it has its detractors, including one who threw up after eating there, for no clear reason.)

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At the bottom is Nolita House. “They wouldn’t put bacon on our burgers even though they had bacon,” explained Jason Beckerman, 33, a lawyer (and Adam’s big brother).

And Rare Bar & Grill on Lexington. “They put the sticks in the burger with the temperature, the name of the place implies that they know the temperature — all the temperatures were off!” complained Dave Becker, 34, a real estate developer.

One off-the-path success was Lure Fishbar, where a seafood chef confused by a table of burger-orderers came out to chat, was told the kitchen over-salted the fries, and sent out free [ice cream](#) sandwiches; it currently ranks 13.

“I went back there on a date,” Brett Weiss said. “He took care of me. Every two seconds he came out to check on me.”

Then there was Peter Luger. The Williamsburg, Brooklyn, steakhouse does not serve burgers at dinner, so the club met on Saturday for lunch. “The first guy ordered a burger, the second guy ordered a burger, the third guy is in the middle of ordering a burger, and he says, ‘Are you guys all ordering burgers? I don’t do burgers,’” Mr. Weiss recalled of the salty old waiter, who sent over a replacement in his stead. “We ordered steak as an appetizer, we all ordered dessert, left the guy like a \$50 tip.”

There was no such drama at Zaitzeff, a bare-bones place with three farm tables where the soundtrack is the sizzle on the grill. One by one, the beefy guy from behind the counter brought burgers (\$13.75) between over-toasted English muffins and heaping plates of fries (Idaho, sweet or mixed, \$5).

The men ate, saying nothing about the burgers. Then Mr. Weiss passed around the ranking sheets, and each studied his personalized list to figure out where Zaitzeff fit.

For Adam Beckerman, it was No. 28. Jed Weiss and Jason Beckerman both put it at 19. Others ranked it at 25, 22, 23, 24 — an unusual consensus: the lower-middle of the pack.

“The burger did not stay together,” said Jason Beckerman, his head hung in shame at having picked Zaitzeff without visiting first, a risky proposition.

“The bacon was good but the meat had no flavor,” declared Brett Weiss.

Jed Weiss summed up: “Salt and pepper.”

They agreed they would not return to Zaitzeff, not even if they were in the neighborhood (City Hall is maybe 10 blocks away). And there are too many burgers out there waiting to be tried.

The Favorites

These are the Burger of the Month Club’s top 10 burgers, in order:

PETER LUGER 178 Broadway (Driggs Avenue), Williamsburg, Brooklyn, (718) 387-7400.

DONOVAN’S PUB 57-24 Roosevelt Avenue, Woodside, Queens, (718) 429-9339.

CITY HALL 131 Duane Street (Church Street), TriBeCa (212) 227-7777.

PRIMEHOUSE 381 Park Avenue South (27th Street), (212) 824-2600.

BOBBY VAN’S GRILL 25 Broad Street (Exchange Place), Financial District, (212) 344-8463.

BURGER JOINT AT LE PARKER MERIDIEN 119 West 56th Street, Midtown, (212) 245-5000.

LANDMARC 179 West Broadway (Leonard Street), TriBeCa, (212) 343-3883.

GENESIS BAR & RESTAURANT 1708 Second Avenue (88th Street), Upper East Side, (212) 348-5500.

BLACK IRON BURGER 540 East Fifth Street (Avenue B), East Village, (212) 677-6067.

BACK FORTY 190 Avenue B (12th Street), East Village, (212) 388-1990.

These are some popular burgers with lower rankings:

CORNER BISTRO (21ST)

RARE BAR & GRILL (44TH)

SHAKE SHACK (30TH)

THE SPOTTED PIG (41ST)

VESELKA (28TH)

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