Burger Backlash

A bacon cheeseburger served on a halved Krispy Kreme glazed doughnut sounds like the stuff of urban legend. It's the kind of lusty, lowbrow indulgence that George Costanza might have fantasized about. But you can't get this baby at Yankee Stadium.

Dubbed "Baseball's Best Burger" by its developers, this St. Louis–area fan favorite is on the menu board at the GMC Ballpark, home of the minor-league Gateway Grizzlies. The doughnut is served glazed side in, sans condiments. Before its unveiling this season, the burger was taste tested and a deal struck with Krispy Kreme to license the use of its name and product in return for advertising at the park. "They were a little hesitant at first," recalls Jeff O'Neill, Director of Media Relations for the Gateway Grizzlies Professional Baseball Team.

Rather than rejecting the quirky burger, fans seem to think that ordering one verges on making a political statement. With carb, fat, and calorie counts that register somewhere near *TILT*, the sandwich represents a welcome backlash against bunless burgers, whole-grain cookies, and other killjoy dietary trends.

There's been a lot of fuss over the Krispy Kreme burger, whose merits have been debated by such media outlets as MSNBC, the *New York Times* Diners Journal, and the Colbert Report. "All the coverage was kind of a surprise," says O'Neill. "I sent out the press release on a Wednesday, and Friday morning I received a phone call from Sports Illustrated. Monday morning rolled around, and my phone didn't stop ringing for about 6 straight hours."

Curiosity about the unconventional ballpark fare continued to build. "We did a lot of radio interviews, and my boss and I flew to New York and did a spot on ESPN2's 'Cold Pizza,'" O'Neill says. "We cooked the burger for them, and they ate it live on the air."

The Grizzly is modeled after the Luther burger, a virtually identical creation served at Mulligan's tavern in Decatur, Georgia, and named for R&B singer Luther Vandross. It's unclear whether Vandross was the inventor of the sandwich or simply an admirer.

The burger has been called everything from sexy and salubrious to eccentric and insane. Consumer nutrition advocates predictably recoil from the very idea of it, but it's caught the fancy of countless bloggers, who like to think that Homer Simpson would appreciate the concept of a doughnut burger.

Wacky or not, any food item that packs 1,000 calories and 45 grams of fat can't help but be tasty. And the success of menu offerings like Hardee's Philly Cheesesteak Thickburger and Burger King's Texas Double Whopper shows that flavor is still the yardstick by which any self-respecting burger is measured.

Taste is a relative term, of course. But while Grizzly fans may strike urban hipsters as a bit Federline, there's no denying that these folks know their beef. Missourians can smell a

rack of baby backs smoking inside an oil drum from two counties over. And the state has produced more than its share of people with famously good appetites, including John Goodman, Rush Limbaugh, and Irma S. Rombauer, author of *The Joy of Cooking*.

Some proud St. Louisans even claim that the hamburger was invented when the city hosted the 1904 World's Fair. The facts are in dispute, but let it suffice to say that the burger at least made its media debut there. To this day, chowhounds nationwide know Missouri's reputation for turning out burgers that have been declared illegal or at least taxable in most red states. Let's annoy the fat police by applauding a few more felony offenders, shall we?

The Guber burger, The Wheel Inn, Sedalia, Missouri. If doughnuts are a natural pairing for the great American burger, why not peanut butter? The oddball Guber burger takes its sweet, sticky cues—and spelling lessons, apparently—from its Krispy Kreme cousin. Road-food junkies have trekked from as far away as California and Florida to sample the Guber burger at The Wheel, a carhop-style burger stand in Sedalia, Missouri.

Proprietors John and Pat Brandkamp say that the previous owner began offering the menu item in 1947, when a Kansas City restaurant operator disclosed the Guber Burger formula in exchange for The Wheel's curly fries recipe. But Brandkamp harbors no trade secrets. "You fry your hamburger, you flip it over, and you put your peanut butter on it," he explains. "But it's gotta be creamy peanut butter 'cause it's gotta have oil in it so it will melt." The flavor is similar to that of a burger served on a sesame-seed bun.

Brandkamp says most customers order the Guber with lettuce, tomato, and mayonnaise. Requests for ketchup and mustard are frowned on, although the grill man will make the sandwich any way the customer wants it. Locals recommend you take your Guber with a limeade or a cherry Pepsi and an order of onion rings or curly fries, dubbed "Suzy Qs" for the first owner's daughter.

In a classic example of the roadside architecture that historian Michael Witzel calls "circular meccas of neon," The Wheel's dining room serves as a hub, and the cars in the lot form the spokes. Beneath a red-and-white striped awning, a sparkling plate-glass window spans the dining room. A sign painted on the window trumpets the "Delicious Guber Burger," complete with a smiling goober sporting a tophat and cane and looking suspiciously like the trademarked Mr. Peanut.

You can still have a carhop deliver a tray right to your window, or you can grab a chrome stool at the diner-style counter inside. "Everybody else went to them drive-through windows," says Brandkamp in his amiable outstate drawl, "but we ain't got no room for it."

Incidentally, St. Louis also takes credit for inventing peanut butter. According to irrefutable sources—Skippy and Smuckers—an unknown local physician concocted peanut butter as a protein supplement for patients with decayed or missing teeth who had trouble chewing meat. In 1890, the good doctor encouraged George Bayle, a St. Louis

food manufacturer, to process and package the ground nut paste. Bayle began selling the new product out of barrels, and its popularity quickly surged.

Of course, a beef patty in a pool of peanut butter amounts to a protein double-tap. But before you place the Guber at the top of your Ten Most Wanted list, get a load of our next black sheep.

The Ed's White Front burger. A deep-fried hamburger? Can you say overkill? Not at Ed's White Front BB-que, which quelled the hunger pangs of North St. Louisans for 46 years. During World War II, this sandwich was a favorite among workers at the nearby munitions plant. Rationed meat could not be allowed to go to waste, so owner Edwin Reinschmidt made burgers from the trimmings of beef brisket, pork butt, and spare ribs served at the restaurant.

These scraps were ground with heels of bread and then hand-formed into patties. The patties were dredged in Golden Dipt seasoning, deep fried, and plopped into a vat of Ed's special barbecue sauce to soak up even more flavor (see recipe). The restaurant was open 24 hours a day to accommodate the ordnance plant's round-the-clock shifts.

After a series of setbacks, including a fire that left the place looking like its charcoal-fired brick oven, Ed's White Front closed in 1979. But its over-the-top burger has become part of the local foodlore. Another fabled dish is the St. Louis slinger, from which our next bad-boy burger takes its inspiration.

BX burger at Big V's Burger Joint. Topped with a fried egg, roasted jalapeños, chili, and a slice of American cheese, the BX burger is modeled after the locally esteemed St. Louis slinger, a breakfast dish—or, to be precise, an early-morning dish—believed to be a hangover cure. Diners throughout the city offer variations on the slinger theme, but the tippler's plate usually includes a couple of fried eggs topped with chili, cheddar cheese, hamburger meat, and sometimes hash browns. The slinger has gained such notoriety that fine-dining chef Larry Forgione last year recreated the dish for snooty New Yorkers, substituting barbecued duck, duck chili, and quail eggs for the usual inelegant ingredients.

Big V is Vito Racanelli, who owns Big V's with his wife, Michele. He named this singularly St. Louis burger after the place where he grew up—the Bronx, abbreviated "BX" by borough insiders. Except for the slice of American, which he insists must be processed cheese for the sake of authenticity, Racanelli uses only fresh ingredients in the BX. He has a local butcher grind the beef for him, whips up batches of bean chili from scratch, and even roasts his own jalapeños, which he purchases at a nearby farmer's market.

But will a BX burger really help you shake off a katzenjammer? "It's helped me a few times," admits Racanelli. If nothing else, downing a BX burger before your BAC rises into regrettable-tattoo territory might keep you from ending up tile-faced at the end of the night. Nutritionists—the same ones who condemn the BX and its ilk for their sat fat

content—say that eating a big, greasy meal will slow the absorption of alcohol into the bloodstream. We think that's a fine excuse to eat a big, greasy meal.

¡Ay, carumba! Self-appointed guardians of public health like to stereotype burger lovers as candidates for gastric bypass surgery. Yet long before Paris Hilton boosted Gen Y's water pressure with her car-wash va-va-voom, the hamburger had gained a following among the beautiful people. Here's how Ray Kroc described a blonde siren he spotted in a dandelion-yellow convertible parked at one of his drive-ins: "It was not her sex appeal but the obvious relish with which she devoured the hamburger that made my pulse hammer with excitement." That must have been some burger.

But the truth is that every Guber and Grizzly has its place—everything in moderation. Someone with too much time on his hands has made the dubious calculation that there are 3,900 calories available per day for every man, woman, and child in the United States. Yet the adult body requires only half that much energy, give or take, to maintain a so-called healthy weight. The mere availability of abundant food, the nutrition nannies argue, encourages Americans to overeat. This temptation, they claim, leads us down a slippery slope of dreadful problems, beginning with a need for seat-belt extenders and ending in misogyny and bioterrorism.

The dietary meddling has reached such absurd proportions that the Simpsons themselves have become scapegoats. Researchers at Rutgers University, whose ample spare time might as well be spent building Lego robots or playing quidditch, have concluded that "Fats, sweets and alcohol, particularly beer, doughnuts, and salty/fatty snacks, accounted for 52 per cent of all foods eaten in [the Simpsons] program." Of course, the little flaw in this study is the idea that television viewers are dimwits who pattern their eating habits after those of cartoon characters.

Admittedly, it's tough to resist, say, a hot sack of White Castle sliders sitting next to you on the front seat of the minivan. And it's safe to say that most Midwesterners have more than a passing acquaintance with the Original Steakburger. But having convenient access to a drive-through is unlikely to trigger an alarming feeding frenzy among those of us who can actually think for ourselves. We have brains as well as stomachs and can steer the Grand Caravan, with its cargo of vulnerable youngsters, right past the Steak 'n Shake pick-up window. Or, now and then, we can decide to pull in.

Whether we shop at Banana Republic or at Lane Bryant, we all want the same thing: choices. Healthful, fresh foods are what we select most days, but once in a while we have a hankering for a really kick-ass burger. And if a quick-service operator is smart, he'll put a ringer or two on the menu. After all, he's responsible for his own bottom line—not that of his customer.