

Beef Encounters

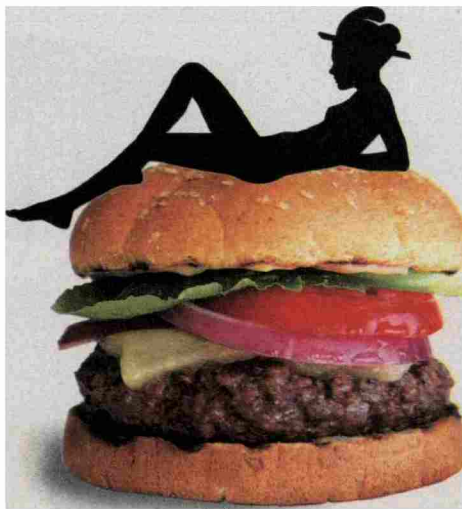
As a public service, the philanthropic Burger Queen chows down.

Fellow Americans: there's good news and bad regarding our national pastimes — eating, snacking and pigging out. The Samurai Shopper respects our constitutional entitlement to life, liberty and the pursuit of voluptuously stacked hamburgers, but those entitlements weigh heavily on us. Literally. Carnivores run amok may soon be unable to run at all. Though looming Golden Arches offer insuperable proof of American entrepreneurial genius, they don't exactly symbolize quality or nourishment. And we've systematically shoved these nasty little buns down everyone's throats: we are *the* burger kings. You're welcome, Finland!

The Samurai Shopper doesn't lie when she says that assembly-line patties deserve a good drubbing. Ground beef from meat-processing cartels continues to sicken the populace. Methane gas exacerbates global warming, and cows are among the chief offenders. Maybe the Hindus have it right. Then again, grass-fed, freshly ground, handmade burgers do reflect America's rugged individualism. And when you want one, you really, really want one. So maybe it's time to upgrade burgers from debased staple into treats for festive occasions.

For instance, if you have an uncontrollable urge to party amid plastic Santas and multiple Elvises while quaffing Sofia Coppola Champagne in a can, join me at the **Trailer Park Lounge and Grill** on West 23rd Street to wolf double-wide burgers and seriously sensational Tater Tots. The delirious kitsch and pseudo-ruffian commotion there are just gravy.

In pioneering spirit, I have explored sham-burgers (turkey, bison, ostrich) and upmarket glam-burgers (self-explanatory). Overrated Kobe/Wagyu burgers came back to haunt me, if you catch my drift. As for great lamb-burgers, no news is bad news: the timid ones at **Flip**, in the Bloomingdale's basement, pretty much flopped. **Belcourt**, a favored Samurai venue on East Fourth Street, stuck bizzaro zucchini



pickles into the mix. Feh!

You'd think the glam-burgers at the venerable "**21**" **Club** would shine, but no. At least a stellar **Opus One** made its wine list but, alas, not by the glass. Beneath toy planes, trucks and sports gear strung from the ceiling, I battled an unremarkable man-burger, plus... what's this? Green beans on the plate? That is just wrong.

Things improved at **Stand** on East 12th Street — my salmon burger (ask for lemon slices) pulled me out of a red-meat quagmire, though I always forgive myself for succumbing to Stand's superior beef burgers drowned with boozy milkshakes. Veggie burgers anywhere, though, are treasonous: eat one and you're off the A-list and off the wall. Definitely A-list are **Telepan**'s ground-chuck-and-nothing-else burgers, buried in mountains of first-class accompaniments, with delicate amuse-bouches in preamble. Add a blond Belgian ale, and you're golden.

And stuffed. "I am large," Walt Whitman wrote. "I contain multitudes." I know, right? Moved by his multi-culti expansiveness, I bit into a bulgogi burger on Bleecker Street, and it bit back. Ouch! Back home in Whitman's Brooklyn, at **Prime Meats** — part of the two Frankies' franchise — I recover with a straightforward Black Angus burger, top-notch

fries and the hilarious “malolactic fermented dill pickle,” washed with a Sixpoint, a hoppy Red Hook brew. Note to Prime Meats: cash only? Not funny.

At **Resto**, a prized spot in my old Curry Hill neighborhood, burgers mean fatback, beef cheek and hanger steak, perfectly cooked beyond the usual medium rare and capped with fried egg, red onion, pickles and mayo. Is that a mouthful or what? The edifice eventually topples, but cutlery saves the day. Yes, using utensils for burgers is wimpy and/or European, but wasting tastiness is un-American.

Daniel Boulud’s no wimpy Frenchman, even if the best glam-burger at **DBGB Kitchen and Bar** is “the Frenchie,” with pork belly, tomato-onion compote, arugula and Morbier cheese. O.K., that’s ridiculously Gallic. But it’s delish, and as American as General Tso’s chicken. **The Little Owl**’s juicy burgers on Bedford Street aren’t nicely priced, but they’re awfully nice. And with a well-balanced glass of light

and lively Côtes du Rhône, I feel transported to . . . where? The Upper East Side?

Well-heeled West Village boîtes leave me exhausted with the overwrought burger fulminations of the chattering classes: bun vs. brioche? Grilled vs. griddled? Short rib vs. sirloin? An 80/20 meat/fat ratio? The Samurai/Machiavelli response? The end justifies the means.

Evan Lobel of **Lobel’s** butcher shop on Madison Avenue also eye-rolls at the 80/20 formula. And, as a fifth-generation all-around meat maven, he should know. He deftly sculptured twice-ground hanger steak/chuck beefcakes for my D.I.Y. burger and added a box of flaky Maldon sea salt for seasoning. I settled the patties gently in a hot, cast-iron skillet, cracked open a Long Island gem — Wölffer Estate Selection Merlot — and, eight minutes later, supped on the two best burgers in these United States. And exceeded my red-meat quota for the rest of the century. ■