

# Montreal Gazette

## A hunk of a burger: Top marks go to Mister Steer for a plump burger of juicy kosher beef seasoned with secret spices

Wed Jun 23 1999

Page: F1 / BREAK

Section: Living: Food

Byline: JULIAN ARMSTRONG

Source: The Gazette

Series: Quest for the Best

Illustrations: Color Photo: PIERRE OBENDRAUF, GAZETTE / Mister Steer's manager, James Gaspar (left), with his father, George, who credits his Hungarian grandmother for the winning burger's recipe.

Color Photo: PIERRE OBENDRAUF, GAZETTE / Cook Armodios Giannoumis: stayed mum about the seasonings of the Mister Steerburger.

A Montreal headquarters for hamburgers for over 40 years has placed first in The Gazette's Quest for the Best burgers in town.

Mister Steer, on Ste. Catherine St. W., is the winner after a taste test of hamburgers from five establishments receiving the most nominations from readers. Dilallo's, on Notre Dame St. W., placed second and McKibbins Pub, on Bishop St., trailed in third place.

The winning hamburgers had a rich beef flavour that was zapped up with seasonings and came in sesame-seed rolls that had been toasted on the inside. More rounded in shape than the flat meat patties provided by the other establishments, these burgers, ordered cooked medium, were crisply brown on the outside, juicy and slightly pink on the inside.

"Far and away the best," said Travel editor Paul Waters.

"The kind of burger you might order over steak," Waters said. "A nice, big, juicy hunk of well-seasoned meat on a nicely toasted bun."

"Nice, blackened exterior, juicy and good texture," said copy editor Mike Shenker.

"This tastes great without any kind of dressing," said photographer John Mahoney.

As good as the best you grill at home, the group agreed.

Only one taster, reporter David Johnston, gave top marks to another burger. He voted Dilallo's the winner, Mister Steer number two. But he admitted he's a regular Dilallo's customer and remembered having better burgers at the restaurant than those our courier brought in.

All other entries, also ordered medium, were cooked almost to the well-done stage and verged on dry when eaten without mustard or relish. Buns were mostly lacklustre, with one exception: a surprising flatbread "bun" from Copoli, on de Maisonneuve Blvd. W.

Johnston compared it to Italian calzone, "or a pita bread cut in four." It contained a wide, flat burger. The bun had more flavour than the meat, tasters agreed, even though there was both mustard and relish

added. The whole thing was cut into four pie-shaped wedges, making four servings that were each almost as big as a single burger from the other places, and for only \$6.60.

The other establishments obeyed our order for no condiments, which we asked for so our panelists could taste flavours unadulterated. Some tasters then added mustard and relish because, although most of the meat had some flavour, it was cooked until it was quite dry.

When the tasting session got under way, facts and theories about Montreal's hamburgers were plentiful.

Mahoney, chomping into a dry patty, said: "If it holds together too firmly, it indicates the presence of fillers in the meat or that the meat has been frozen."

The seasoning in McKibbins' burger caused repeat tasting and some debate. What was that season? A spice? Garlic? We couldn't decide. "Unidentifiable - the spicing blows it," commented TV and radio columnist Mike Boone.

There was no doubt in the tasters' minds that Mister Steer had added some seasonings to its beef. But what spices or other ingredients is a company secret, we discovered when we visited the Ste. Catherine St. W. restaurant.

Discovering owner George Caspar, 77, was Hungarian-born, I asked if paprika was one of the spices. Definitely not, said Caspar and his son, James, 52, who manages the 198-seat restaurant.

"Don't tell her what we use," James Caspar directed one of his cooks, Arman

Giannoumis, as the latter watched carefully over a group of burgers as they sizzled and browned on the big grill.

Finally, after talking of the long history of the place - its original location at 486 Ste. Catherine St. W., which was closed in 1996, and a one-time branch at 6647 St. Hubert St., which burned down in 1981 - I begged for information about at least one seasoning and was told garlic was part of the mix.

Not much of it, though. The flavouring is cleverly done because it gives the burger character and pep without any one spice being distinguishable.

The secret to their burgers, the two Caspars maintained, is that they use only kosher beef. The kosher butchers insist on meat that's no more than 48 hours from slaughter, James Caspar said. This means the meat, which is 80-per-cent lean, is always fresh and clean, and contains all its natural juices.

Some of his competitors, he speculated, may use frozen beef from Argentina or Australia. He agreed with Mahoney, when told of the photographer's theory that a dry burger could be made with frozen meat or meat to which fillers, such as textured vegetable protein, had been added.

Why the rounded shape? "Our burgers are handmade. They're always the round shape. It's better on the grill. The juice stays in when you cook the burger," said the restaurant manager.

The rounded shape allows orders that range from rare to well done. "Because it's thick in the middle, you can make it to the doneness the customer asks for. But

sometimes, when a customer wants well done, they'll ask if we're making the burgers smaller," said George Caspar. The smaller size is because more fat and juice cooks off with well-done patties, he added.

Mister Steer opened in 1958 on Philipps Square under another owner. George Caspar, who emigrated from Hungary in 1957, joined the business soon after and bought it in 1963.

"I consider our Mister Steerburger (as the menu calls it) is my grandmother's recipe," said the gray-haired restaurateur.

It's served with a side salad, which pleases him because, as he put it, "Nobody eats our hamburger without a salad, so it lowers the cholesterol level."

Most customers add the restaurant's popular thin, curly french fries, called Suzy Q, bringing the price from the \$4.45 basic to \$5.50. Alternatives to the fries are a baked potato or baked beans.

The Suzy Q name dates back 36 years, the Caspars reminisced, to a small restaurant in Florida which served their fries in this shape. The Suzy Q was a dance, popular in the 1920s, said James Caspar.

Historical references and memories are part of the long, cavernous place, located in the one-time Indian Room, which was once attached to the Chick-N-Coop restaurant. "Because it's considered historical, we needed a permit to renovate it after a fire we had upstairs in 1988," said James Caspar.

One waitress has worked there for 27 years and the shortest time a staff member has been employed is 10 years.

Asked about a tradition years ago that the restaurant would serve its burgers to take out with a slice of onion, wrapped in paper, and a stick of Dentyne chewing gum, George Caspar laughed.

"People complained because they'd eat the paper along with the onion. We stopped the gum in 1981 because our price for gum was running at \$2,000 a month," he said.

The win for The Gazette's Quest for the Best turned out to be the second such award from this newspaper, and the Caspars produced the documents to prove it. The first was in 1979 when The Gazette ran a contest called A Taste of Montreal.

But the establishment's first contest win was even earlier, in 1971, when the now-defunct Canadian Magazine/Star Weekly, gave Mister Steer's hamburgers top marks.

A total of 73 establishments had their hamburgers nominated, including three of the big chains. Harvey's received 10 nominations, with one each for McDonald's and Wendy's. Our plan was to test the half-dozen places with a least a dozen nominations; unfortunately Dic Ann's on Pie IX Blvd., with no telephone, was not open the Monday of our test and so was not represented.

What's the perfect drink with a hamburger? Draft beer, suggests George Caspar, or a Coke.

Besides the first-, second- and third-place winners, we tested hamburgers from Restaurant Copoli, 5181 de Maisonneuve Blvd. W., and Restaurant La Paryse, 302 Ontario St. E.

## Gazette's Top Hamburgers

### Brand

1. Mister Steer, 1198 Ste. Catherine St. W.,

(514) 866-3233

Price \$4.45

2. Dilallo's, 2523 Notre Dame St. W.,

(514) 934-0818

\$2.95

3. McKibbins Pub, 1426 Bishop St., (514)  
288-1580

\$6.95

### Comments

1. Plump, juicy, well-flavoured beef patty in a toasted, sesame-seed roll, the Mister Steerburger tastes like the best home cooking.

2 A traditional burger, cooked until the patty is a little dry, with a strong beef flavour, in a basic, fresh bun. No surprises.

3 A generous, charcoal-grilled burger in a sesame-seed bun. Patty and bun on the dry side; meat is seasoned.

Quest for the Best winners so far:

Best hamburgers: Mister Steer, 1198 Ste. Catherine St. W., (514) 866-3233 (June 23, 1999).

Best spring rolls: Tiki-Ming, Alexis Nihon Plaza, 1500 Atwater Ave., (514) 932-9123

(April 14, 1999).

Best chocolate truffle: Divine Chocolatier, 1454 Drummond St.,

(514) 282-0829 (Feb. 10, 1999).

Best Christmas cookies: Oatmeal lace cookies, recipe from Kay Palkhivala (Dec. 9, 1998).

Best hot dog: Costco (formerly Club Price), Sinai Kosher hot dog, 1015 Marche Central St., (514) 331-4356 (Oct. 28, 1998).

Best smoked-meat sandwich: Schwartz's, 3895 St. Laurent Blvd., (514) 842-4813 (June 10, 1998).

Best croissant: Duc de Lorraine Patisserie Francaise, 5002 Cote des Neiges Rd., (514) 731-4128, 731-8081 (April 1, 1998).

Best bagel: St. Viateur Bagel Shop, 263 St. Viateur St., (514) 276-8044 (Jan. 28, 1998).

Best vegetarian pizza: Bardeco, 605 Notre Dame St., Lachine,

(514) 639-7474 (Nov. 26, 1997).

Best souvlaki: Marathon Souvlaki, 3938 Notre Dame Blvd., Chomedey, Laval, (450) 681-7385 (Oct. 1, 1997).