

BLISS ON A BUN MEET THE NEW BURGER KING

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Five Napkin Burger

626 Ninth Ave., at 44th Street

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FIVE Napkin Burger came along just in time for the End of the World as We Know It. No \$40 rabbit or ostrich “3 ways.” Just tons of terrific 10-ounce ground-chuck burgers and super-crisp fries for \$14.95 (\$13.95 at lunch), served up in a colorful, Slaughterhouse Deco setting.

There are dishes all over the map at this “American bar and grill” - maki rolls! - but the beef burgers are the act to catch. Chef Andy D’Amico, a partner with owner Simon Oren, says 80 percent of his customers order burgers, including ones made from lamb, turkey and (groan) tuna.

But fully 44 percent of all diners get the ground chuck. They’re showing rare good taste in a town overburged with mutant strains.

Ground chuck is the gold standard for moisture and mouth feel to go with flavor. But it’s under siege by sirloin, lamb, turkey, chicken, brisket and American Wagyu. Even ultra-fatty Japanese Wagyu burgers have popped up, although they’re so loose they’d work better in a bowl than on a bun.

Five Napkin’s title dish is 100 percent fresh ground chuck, made into a patty in-house, with what D’Amico estimates a 20 to 22 percent fat content. He adds a squirt of fat to bring it up to 25 percent - essential for the juicy ooze that’s half the reason for eating the damn things.

“I never knew I’d have to spend so much time with burger meat,” D’Amico laughed of the learning curve.

“It’s a challenge. A 10-ounce burger is very different than a 4- or 5-ounce patty.

“The flavor comes from the fat. Straight chuck won’t have enough fat, and sirloin has even less,” he said. He blames some disappointingly dry burgers I had shortly after the summer opening on leaner product he’s since dropped - “I’ve changed the meat three times,” he said.

Now the burgers seem just right. The “Original Five Napkin,” modeled on the one at Oren’s and D’Amico’s Nice Matin on the Upper West Side, is an inch thick at the center and topped with comte cheese, caramelized onions and a drop of rosemary aioli. A close cousin for the same price comes with sharp cheddar and bacon.

Both are served on a simple soft bun. I love everything but the onions, so I have the burgers without them.

The ones I’ve had lately have all been grand slams, accurately griddled medium-rare. Adding to the pleasure is that, unlike most burger eateries with cult followings, Five Napkin is a grown-up joint.

Manhattan’s masochistic millions tend to regard hamburgers as suspect unless one endures an endless wait or a dive-bar bruising just to get your hands on them. But Five Napkin Burger offers professional service in a cozy setting by Roy Nachum, with leather booths and retro sconces softening the edges of a hanging meat hook, scales and white tile walls and columns.



Chef Andy D’Amico (inset) of Five Napkin Burger and his juicy offerings.

It’s actually more comfortable than pricier Nice Matin, where the Five Napkin number was born six years ago. Of that experience, D’Amico recalls, “Simon had this idea for a Five-Napkin Burger, but he didn’t have a conception of what it should be.

“So I tried making it slightly Provencal with rosemary aioli, comte and the onions.”

The Nice Matin version is broiled, not griddled - but the flavor is just about the same.

The way to order a Five Napkin is medium-rare. But I’ve found too often that “medium rare” is often heard as “medium well” by waiters to whom English is a second language. If that’s politically incorrect to say, tough - just like an overdone burger. So enunciate clearly!

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So Overdone...

THE dirty secret is that hamburgers are inconsistent everywhere. I’ve had great ones at Essex World Caf, a deli on Liberty Street across from Ground Zero, and stinkers at legendary Big Nick’s on Broadway.

Here are some famous Manhattan hamburgers that don’t live up to their reputations:

CORNER BISTRO - There’s nothing wrong with this hefty \$6 (without fries) West Village bar number except its overblown reputation. Tasty enough, it’s not a dish you couldn’t make yourself at home with supermarket meat. The only cheese available is processed American.

BURGER JOINT -The Zagat Survey’s No. 1 fave, tucked inside the Parker Meridien Hotel lobby, churns out a juicy, buttery burger. But it’s like a football scrimmage at busy times and the beef can be full of the hard, stringy sinew common to cheaper chuck.

SHAKE SHACK -Gullible tourists line up for 90 minutes in Madison Square Park for a 4-ounce, Los Angeles-style patty unredeemed by a hint of brisket and cooked only one way, medium - which often meets well-done.

DB BISTRO MODERNE - I loved the sirloin/braised short ribs/truffle burger that was introduced five years ago - until I found myself eating everything (bun, potatoes, etc.) except the burger itself, which seriously lacks the ooze factor.