

A Journey of Enlightenment... Finding the Perfect Burger

By Laura Stewart

I have always said that the indication of a truly great meal is if you are still thinking about it the next day, or even better, the next week. And when you can compound that with great service and wonderful ambience, you have the perfect recipe for a great dining experience.

In the last year or so, my husband and I have embarked on the selfless journey in search of the best dining experience in Northern California to eat one specific menu item, the sought after gourmet burger. This article will take you to some of the best places I have discovered so prepare to wet your pallets and bon appetit!

Call me anti-religious, a food snob or maybe just insane but I still don't understand the whole In-n-Out hype. If I'm going to have all the fat and calories of a burger, I don't want to eat it wrapped in paper in a cardboard tray with a diet coke. No, no. I want to have a nice glass of red wine, some caramelized onions, maybe some gruyere cheese, just something that makes it special and different. And I want a little more ambience than sitting in the front seat of my car in a parking lot.

No one can dispute that you are going to get a better view with a visit to the Napa

Valley. Known for some of the best restaurants in Northern California, where better to partake in a gourmet burger that may be a more price effective option on the savvy food menus? At the historic Martini House restaurant in Saint Helena, the intimate and charming décor comes brilliantly together with the adventurous cuisine of Executive chef Todd Humphries. On the lunch menu, the Kobe beef burger from Snake River Farms comes with wine infused sweet onions, melted Swiss cheese and the chef's special sauce on an American style brioche bun made fresh from a local bakery. It is served with Panko crusted onion rings lightly salted with curry salt. Make sure to peruse their comprehensive wine list for a full bodied red wine.

At least three times a year we find a reason to head down to Carmel, a truly magical place. We always find a way to make it over to Pebble Beach for one of the best views of the coast and my favorite burger in Northern California. If you can't afford the green fees, at least you can enjoy the view! Overlooking the 18th green sits our favorite lunch spot, the Stillwater Bar & Grill. On a sunny day, sit on the patio, take in the fresh ocean air and order the Brasserie burger. This succulent sirloin burger is topped with your favorite cheese and their special "Stillwater" sauce, described as a pesto and garlic aioli. Enjoy with garlic French fries and order a half bottle of Rafanelli Zinfandel

and you will understand the true meaning of heaven on earth.

If you happen to be traveling with your dogs, as we often are, try the Cypress Inn in downtown Carmel where your faithful friend can eat with you inside the restaurant. They have a delicious burger and although it isn't Pebble Beach, the atmosphere of begging dogs around you always makes it an entertaining dining experience with easy conversation.

If you are craving a gourmet burger a little closer to home I recommend Paul Martin's American Bistro or La Provence in Roseville. For something a little different try Morgan's Veggie burger at Guy Fieri's new Johnny Garlic restaurant also in Roseville, it is a flavorful substitute made of 16 ingredients in a lively and vibrant setting. Heading to downtown Sacramento, try the sliders at Bistro 33 or at the new trendy restaurant and nightclub called Mix. Both are petite creative adaptations that will satisfy your gourmet burger cravings. If you are finishing



a local round at Haggin Oaks, enjoy their new lunch menu that includes a great tasting sirloin cheeseburger.

Finally, as we head into Spring and Summer, or as men rather refer to as barbeque season, let me challenge you to take some accountability for your lack of burger creativity and spice up your burger fare with some new ingredients this year. Pick up the book, "Build A Better Burger" by James McNair and start experimenting. My favorite so far is the Tuscan Burger Brushetta. The burger has onion, parsley and gorgonzola mixed in with the meat and then topped with prosciutto, fontina cheese and a tomato bruschetta topping.

It is absolutely "enlightening."

