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Ranking Toronto's gourmet burger joints

Gourmet burgers are newer than new, but some fail to deliver on the trend's promise

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Toronto is flipping over gourmet hamburgers.

Four high-end burger bars have opened downtown in the last month, broadening our already wide choice of beef, lamb, chicken, salmon and bison patties served with epicurean toppings. There hasn't been a trend this pronounced since charcuterie.

And why not, when a quality patty – made from grass-fed beef raised without hormones or antibiotics and graded Prime – offers the flame-grilled thrill of a \$40 steak, at a fraction of the cost.

"A burger represents a bit of happiness amidst all the doom and gloom of the current economic situation," explains BQM Burger Shoppe founder Saeed Mohamed, who's opening a third location this month in the old Stem Diner on Queen St. W.

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Oh Boy Burger was winner in Star survey.

RICK MADONIK/TORONTO STAR

If diners are tightening their purse-strings, owners are shying away from fine-dining restaurants.

"Burgers and beer sell a lot easier and hit a wider market," says Brock Shepherd, chef/owner of The Burger Bar in Kensington Market.

To find the ultimate patty, I ordered a plain burger – toppings like truffle paste can be so distracting – at six of the latest gourmet burger bars. Half the kitchens broke the city's safety rules and offered to cook ground meat medium-rare, which doesn't kill E. coli. Onion rings were the side dish of choice.

The brand new Oh Boy Burger Market at 571 Queen St. W. served the winning burger and rings.

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Owner Joey McGuirk (ex-Prohibition) is thinking of franchising. I predict a flippin' success.

OH BOY BURGER MARKET, 571 Queen St. W., 416-361-6154

Open Since: Nov. 12, 2009

Beef: Premade Leavoy Rowe patties developed by chef Paul Boehmer from AAA and Prime ground chuck

Price: \$7.50 for 8-oz Oh Boy Burger, \$3.25 for onion rings

Atmosphere: Haute barn with open kitchen, exposed lightbulbs, loud Michael Jackson and friendly counter service

Licensed: Pending

Minutes to order: 13

Served on: Square wooden plate

Burger: Squirtingly juicy, as tender as the finest filet mignon, well-timed on grill and nestled with picture-perfect garnishes into soft, eggy Ace Bakery sesame bun — only a missing dash of salt keeps this burger from perfection

Onion rings: Frozen McCain Beefeater thick-cut rings emerge from deep fryer blessedly greaseless and fantastically crisp, with melting sweet Spanish onions inside

Signature burger: Oh Boy Classic, \$7.50, is a basic burger with roasted garlic mayo

Overall score (out of 4): 3.5

CRAFT BURGER, 830 Yonge St. (+ 1 other location), 416-922-8585

Open since: January, 2009

Beef: Ontario AAA ground chuck

Price: \$5.65 for 6-oz. classic burger, \$2.95 for onion rings

Atmosphere: Modern with communal table, loud R&B, art for sale, desultory counter service

Licensed: No

Minutes to order: 14

Served on: Rectangular tin pan lined with brown butcher paper

Burger: Moist patty tastes like well-aged steak, crosshatched from grill, faintly pink in centre on soft sesame bun

Onion Rings: Bland

Signature burger: Craft Burger comes with sautéed mushrooms and rosemary-garlic mayo, \$6.95

Overall score: 3

THE BURGER BAR, 318 Augusta Ave., 416-922-7423

Open since: Oct. 13, 2009

Beef: Two cuts of naturally raised Beretta Farms beef loosely ground in secret formula, patties formed to order without filler

Price: \$8 for 6-oz. burger, \$6 for onion rings

Atmosphere: Western saloon with bubbly table service

Licensed: Yes

Minutes to order: Too distracted by Flying Monkeys Hoptical Illusion pale ale to notice

Served on: White rectangular plate too formal for room

Burger: Crumbly, salty with strong beef flavour and homemade look; chewy white Cobs Bread bun

Onion Rings: Also crumbly and salty, with hand-dipped buttermilk-panko crust

Signature burger: Alba burger with grape tomatoes, \$9.95, oozes truffle aioli

Overall score: 2.5

GOURMET BURGER CO., 9 Charles St. W. (+ 1 other location), 647-351-6408,

Open since: Oct. 5, 2009

Beef: Canadian AAA chuck, aged minimum 30 days, ground twice to remove gristle and shapped off-site, free of binders, flavoured with pepper and Worcestshire sauce

Price: \$5.50 for 6-oz. GBC burger, \$2.95 for onion rings

Atmosphere: Modern décor with helpful counter service

Licensed: No

Minutes to order: 8 minutes

Served on: Metal pie plate lined with brown butcher paper

Burger: Terrible texture: thin, dry, chewy thanks to overprocessed meat