

Executive
Summary

- A look inside the ongoing American burger revolution, from independents to chains.
- Menued and conceptual ideas to transform burgers, hot dogs, sausages and other sandwiches.
- Ethnic, artisan and local points of differentiation specific to sandwiches.

FOOD PRODUCT
DESIGNSandwiches Go
Gourmet

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Perhaps the idea first set roots when an enlightened soul added crisp, smoky, peppered bacon—and maybe a slice of vine-ripened, heirloom tomato—to that most comforting of childhood classics, grilled cheese, instantly updating it for a more-adult audience.

Sandwiches—from erstwhile lowly burgers to hot dogs and sausages, among others—remain open books to inspired accents, creatively transforming the everyday into gourmet.

Burgers, particularly, have taken the spotlight of late. Tony chefs like Daniel Boulud and Tom Colicchio have thrown their toques into the burger ring, and chains have eagerly joined the fun—all collectively feeding on the energy of an American audience ever-willing to advance into new culinary territory, particularly when such indulgences remain affordable.

Independent inspirations

In key cities across the land, restaurants offering upscale takes on burgers, hot dogs, sausages and other sandwiches have inspired serpentine lines and otherwise-insufferable wait times.

Danny Meyer's Shake Shack—a leader in the galvanizing “better burger” movement (and no stranger to dogs)—has maintained an endured wait since its 2004 inception in New York's Madison Square Park (and is now actively expanding well beyond the Big Apple).

Chicago's home to two similarly pacesetting establishments: Kuma's Corner and Hot Doug's. Kuma's dishes burgers dubbed heavy-metal-style. A few samples: the Metallica (Buffalo sauce, bacon, blue cheese), Brujeria (topped with a jalapeño popper stuffed with cream cheese and chorizo, Cheddar, charred tomato salsa) and Lair of the Minotaur (caramelized onions, pancetta, Brie, bourbon-soaked pears). Hot Doug's offers regular Polish, bratwurst, Italian, andouille, thuringer and, of course, dogs, but the specials—such as Chardonnay and Jalapeño Rattlesnake Sausage with Roasted Yellow Pepper Mayonnaise and Morbier Cheese; Philly Cheesesteak Beef Sausage with Cream Cheese Mustard, Caramelized Onions and Smoked Provolone Cheese; and Smoked Portuguese Linguica with Saffron Rouille and Olive Manchego Cheese, to name a bare few—ratchet up the creativity.

“Those places in particular are helping set trends. Burgers and sausages—encased meats—are just vehicles for delivering new flavors,” says Chris Kline, senior executive chef, Sara Lee Foodservice, Downers Grove, IL. “They’re taking the ordinary and making it extraordinary. They’re taking things that people maybe have heard about but aren’t very familiar with—perhaps that they might be a little nervous about trying—and putting it into an affordable price range.” Particularly in the current economy, this level of affordable adventure works.

The rise in popularity of hot dogs and sausages likewise is connected to economic concerns. “Sausage is recession-proof,” says Kline. “Burgers are affected by fluctuating beef prices, but sausage has more flexibility,” particularly in food-service, where ingredients can shift a bit with the times. The rise in ethnic exposure in the sandwich world also plays to sausage’s favor. “Most countries around the world have some kind of encased meat.” Although he taps Italian as the king of sausages, “chorizo is going to be the next big sausage to take hold on the national level.”

The daily grind

When it comes to sausage, it’s all about the grind. But more burgers are stepping outside of purely beef territory. Adam Moore, corporate chef, Charlie Baggs, Inc., Chicago, suggests operators use alternate proteins to create “wow” flavor profiles with blends of meats and herbs—for example, ground turkey, duck and chicken with rosemary, thyme and garlic.”

According to Barbara Zatto, executive chef and sales manager, west region, Mizkan Americas Inc., Mt. Prospect, IL, “Restaurants are developing individual flavor profiles for their own burger meat created from a blend of beef cuts, such as brisket, short rib, sirloin or chuck—or even a white meat,” noting that in some markets, these artisan burger meats will be ground in-house, and sometimes sourced from a local farm.

Saucy secrets

Sauces often come into play on today’s gourmet burgers. Zatto sees sauce options like wine reductions, vinaigrettes,

balsamic glazes, sriracha types, sake glazes, and even something like a Port wine onion jam, as viable options for accenting burgers beyond everyday ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise and barbecue sauce. “Sauces build flavor and add either bright or low acidic notes, which help balance the richness of the meat,” she says. “The ethnic trend also allows chefs to be creative and innovative in their definition of a burger. We’re seeing influences from the ethnic food trucks, and the sauces carry the ethnic and upscale concept of a burger.”

But don’t expect tried-and-true condiments to remain sedentary while gourmet sandwich sauces are on the rise. To wit: French’s Flavor Ingredients now has a “Mustard Mixology” program, which aids operators in developing signature sauces, such as smoky chipotle honey mustard or bistro Dijon aioli, using its namesake mustard as the key building block and customizing with ingredients already in the back of the house.

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In addition to their use on burgers, “it’s important to select sauces and toppings that could be used for other dishes in other ways; for example, as a dipping sauce for a fried item,” notes Kyleigh Beach, research chef, Charlie Baggs, Inc.

Beach suggests curried mayo and salsas to give a burger “an approachable ethnic twist. Burgers can be a great carrier for ethnic flavors, because of the familiarity and neutrality of a beef patty and plain bun.”

Artisanal and local are two angles Zatto sees as “on the horizon” for hot dogs. “Similar to the burger trend, chefs will top the dogs with better-quality ingredients that are fun and unique,” she says. “I also see possibilities for hot dogs to reflect regional taste preferences, and openings for flavorful vegetarian hot dogs.”

Kline also expects ethnic sandwiches to make significant inroads to chain menus in the coming months and years. Another Chicago restaurant, Xoco—helmed by Rick Bayless—is helping build momentum behind ethnic sandwich spins with its street-food-inspired menu, including its range of *tortas* (Mexican sandwiches), featuring everything

lending chains—most notably the rapidly expanding Five Guys Burgers and Fries—enter the ring.

Burger King has tested the waters with its Whopper Bar, which presents customers with customizing topping options, like guacamole, pepper bacon, blue cheese, “angry” or grilled onions, jalapeños, sautéed mushrooms, and a range of sauces (barbecue, A.1., “angry” mustard sauce, bourbon, blackened Cajun, etc.), along with new menued creations like the BK Black and Bleu Steakhouse XT (Cajun blackened sauce and blue cheese; the XT stands for “extra thick”) and California Whopper (bacon, Swiss cheese and guacamole).

“The design-your-own-burger trend is big, giving diners the options of their choices of meat, sauces, vegetable toppings and textural components,” says Zatto.


Standard Burger King units now menu the cobranded A.1. Steakhouse XT (A.1. sauce, cheese, crispy onions, lettuce, tomato). Recent limited-time offers (LTOs) include the Smoky Cheddar Steakhouse XT and the Jalapeño & Cheese Stuffed Steakhouse.

McDonald’s has made waves with its Angus line (such as the Chipotle BBQ Bacon, and Mushroom & Swiss), now part of the full-time menu—and in Canada it’s tied to a locally sourced claim (“100% pure Canadian beef in every bite”); similar local-food claims have surfaced at units in Australia, New Zealand, England and Ireland. The Angus burgers have also found translation into the ever-expanding Snack Wrap line.

Wendy’s has jumped into the bacon craze with its Baconator and Bacon Deluxe options, and has also tested an LTO Bacon & Blue and Spicy Baconator (gaining its spicy bite from pepper Jack cheese and jalapeños).

And although a long list of regional and national chains continually diversify the field, it’s Five Guys Burgers and Fries (a “better burger” chain a la Shake Shack) that’s making serious waves. It’s the fastest growing chain in the nation, currently sporting over 750 locations with 200 more poised to open this year.

Nevertheless, practicality is king on such a grand scale. “At the QSR level, high-quality industrial ingredients and ease of production are the keys to development,” says Zatto. “Products need to keep the integrity of the profile the chef envisions, yet they need to be simplified for consistency.”

Achieving that balance between streamlined practicality and edgy innovation will likely determine who’s still standing tall as the burger wars wage unabated. 

MARKET SNAPSHOT

Go Ethnic and Premium

In its 2009 “Burger Consumer Trend Report,” Chicago-based Technomic cites a national survey noting that 94% of consumers eat burgers “at least occasionally,” and 91% bite into one “at least once a month.” Impressive stats, indeed.

And, according to the 2010 “Sandwich Consumer Trend Report,” also from Technomic, more than a quarter of consumers (26%) “strongly agree” that they would like more restaurants to offer ethnic sandwiches and/or sandwich ingredients, with 29% noting they are “very likely” to try ethnic flavors or ingredients for sandwiches eaten away from home, with Italian and Mexican topping the list. The report also notes that more than a third of consumers “strongly agree” that they are willing to pay more for premium sandwiches.

from chorizo to braised Tallgrass short ribs and *carnitas*—and much more—and accented with a dizzying array of high-culinary toppings.

Chain reactions

The U.S. quick-service restaurant (QSR) giants, McDonald’s, Burger King and Wendy’s, all have their foundations firmly grounded in the all-American burger. And although each retains classic, time-tested burger mainstays on the menu, each has ventured into new territory as chal-