



Well Done

Atlanta's best chefs reinvent the burger joint.

BY BRET LOVE



A few years ago, fancy fare was the hottest thing on Atlanta's dining scene. But in the wake of the flagging economy, a bevy of burger joints have popped up, eliciting battle cries from devout Yelpers eager to crown the city's next big cheese.

Richard Blais threw the gauntlet down when he partnered with Barry Mills to open FLIP burger boutique in October 2008. The celebrity chef (recently crowned winner of *Top Chef All-Stars*) was coming off the failure of his upscale restaurant BLAIS and was attracted by the challenge of creating what Mills calls “fine dining between two buns.”

“Closing my restaurant was tough, but I’m stronger and smarter for it,” Blais says. “FLIP is a more recession-friendly restaurant, and it was fun to take something as common as burgers and give it a twist, with modern design, beautiful aesthetics and a creative menu.” That menu — including signature items such as the rBQ burger (with pulled brisket, coleslaw, rBQ sauce and smoked mayo) and blackened shrimp burger — immediately resulted in lines out the door, not to mention contenders hoping to replicate FLIP’s success.

In Decatur, George Frangos (formerly of Concentrics Restaurants) opened Farm Burger, offering grass-fed and locally sourced fare. At favorite Holeman & Finch Public House, Chef Linton Hopkins garnered attention by offering just 24 burgers per night at 10pm sharp. The time is announced via bullhorn, creating a bit of fanfare — and sometimes they sell out in less than a minute. (Hint: The burger is also a staple of its Sunday brunch.) And Chef Shaun Doty shut down Shaun’s, a four-year-old fine-dining restaurant in Inman Park, in order to focus on Yeah! Burger (which *Bon Appétit* named as one of its favorite burger spots in America).

Focusing on organic, locally sourced and seasonally available fare, Doty’s venture with partner Erik Maier allows guests to customize burgers with a vast array of options, including sunflower sprouts, bacon jam and cage-free fried eggs. In Doty’s view, the burger boom can be chalked up to a return to simplicity.

“A burger resonates with people because it’s like a childhood souvenir and it transcends classes,” he says. “When the economy went south, people started to return to more simple values. But people are also more informed about the way that eating impacts our health and our environment.”

Now, what was once a mere trend has erupted into a fullblown free-for-all. Grindhouse Killer Burgers, which has earned rave reviews for its angus burgers, recently expanded into a second Atlanta location. Boardwalk Fresh Burgers & Fries is opening a location at Ansley Mall, the first of a reported

50 new franchises it plans to open in Georgia. And the NYC-based 5 Napkin Burger is taking over some prime Midtown real estate, opening at the corner of 10th Street and Piedmont Avenue.

Whether the burger boom is based on consumer demand or the attractive profit margin it offers owners, Doty suggests that its impact can only be positive. “I’m not afraid of competition, because as chefs we innovate and constantly improve our product. If chefs and consumers demand higher quality, that’s a great thing for our American food culture.”

In other words, no matter who comes out on top once the Atlanta burger battle’s dust has settled, it’s the customer who is ultimately the real winner.

Yeah! Burger 2 locations; 404-496-4393; yeahburger.com