

VEGGIE BURGERS

done right



Courtesy of 5 Napkin Burger

Bring a fresh eye to the process and science of developing a satisfying veggie burger.

By Jody Shee

GONE are the days when chefs can unflinchingly thaw and fry a frozen distributor-sourced veggie patty for their vegetarian and vegan guests. Those who have tasted the goods from creative chefs expect and demand a hearty and flavorful burger-like sandwich.

Because veggie burger preparation techniques are absent from most respected culinary reference books, it's up to imaginative chefs

to devise their own. That makes differentiation only natural.

Begin with this goal: Satisfy the guest. "Maybe they don't enjoy the taste and texture of meat, so to simulate what tastes like meat is peculiar," says Dave McCue, associate professor at The Culinary Institute of America (CIA), Hyde Park, N.Y. Before his teaching days, McCue and his wife owned

Opposite: The substance of the veggie burger created at 5 Napkin Burger, New York, comes from duxelles combined with lentils and brown rice.

and operated a restaurant in Fairfield County, Conn., where he developed a veggie burger.

He wanted to create something with vegetable flavor, yet rich. “Not in a fatty sense, but depth of flavor. I wanted it to have an earthiness to it, and the feeling you were getting complete nourishment,” he says.

McCue stayed away from artificial flavors, soy protein and wheat products, considering those with celiac disease. He wanted a hot burger-like sandwich that would satiate vegetarians and leave them with the feeling that they were thought of and cared about.

SUBSTANCE FIRST

With a goal clearly in mind, McCue started with the main bulk of the veggie burger. His Italian heritage and bearings led him to risotto. He found that combining one-third each cooked risotto, wild rice and lentils led to a well-balanced base with the nuttiness of the rice, earthiness of lentils and the complete protein of rice and beans combined.

While the three-component combo worked as a base on which to build for McCue, quinoa, red and beluga lentils and chopped walnuts make up the body of the veggie burger at Americana Restaurant & Lounge in Des Moines, Iowa. Executive chef Mike Holman knew he wanted the flavor of lentils and quinoa to shine through, “and as far as the flavor, you can’t compare it to any name brand in the store,” he says.

The meaty-flavored base of the veggie burger at the six locations of 5 Napkin Burger, including the flagship store in New York, comes from duxelles combined with lentils and brown rice, says chef/partner Andy D’Amico.

At Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, Fla., two restaurants feature veggie burgers—

THE FINAL TOUCH

The flavor of a carefully crafted veggie burger should be able to stand on its own, but no thoughtful chef would allow that to happen. Notice how some dress up their work.

- **Chipotle mayonnaise** is the choice condiment for the veggie burger featuring tofu and ground mushrooms at Gateway Market & Café in Des Moines, Iowa. The veggie burger is served on a ciabatta bun and comes with fried onion rings.
- The veggie burger featuring risotto, wild rice and lentils created by Dave McCue, associate professor at The Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park, N.Y., is enhanced with a spread of **honey mustard** and served on brioche. Other appropriate condiments are tomato slices, alfalfa sprouts, baby greens and baby arugula.
- **Chevre cheese and tamari** aioli top the veggie burger made up largely of quinoa, red and beluga lentils and chopped walnuts at Americana Restaurant & Lounge in Des Moines. It also features smoked tomatoes, caramelized onions and fresh greens on a white bun prepared by a local bakery.

disguised by the sandwich names. The Black Bean Burger at Old Port Royale, a quick-service restaurant at Disney’s Caribbean Beach Resort, gets its bulk, as expected, from black beans. “It has great nutritional value with a lower cholesterol and calorie count than a beef burger,” says chef Philippe Cuenin. “Our cast members were involved in the development of this burger. They brought their authentic Caribbean food knowledge to the final product.”

Whispering Canyon Café at Disney’s Wilderness Lodge serves Quinoa Cakes. As the stand-out ingredient, quinoa is cooked in vegetable stock and combined into a soffrito with olive oil, garlic, shallots and spices, says chef Lorene Vanetti. The goal is a lighter, less-dense patty with the bonus of being gluten-free for a nutritious meal.

At Gateway Market & Café in Des Moines, the goal was umami/savory flavors rather than mimicking a beef patty. The result was

- The Black Bean Burger at Old Port Royale restaurant at Orlando-based Walt Disney World’s Caribbean Beach Resort is served with many types of mayonnaise, salsa or relish, such as **pepper relish, corn salsa or chipotle/lime mayonnaise**. It also sometimes is served on a bed of mixed greens and fresh arugula with white balsamic vinaigrette.
- **The Quinoa Cakes** offered at Whispering Canyon Café at Disney’s Wilderness Lodge are served with tossed greens, **roasted red pepper coulis and edamame salsa**.
- **The veggie burger** at six-unit 5 Napkin Burger, including the New York flagship store, gets much of its substance from **duxelles** combined with lentils and brown rice. It is served on 7-grain bread with house-cured pickles and a creamy French dressing, ketchup and relish—with lettuce and tomato added for good measure.

a foundation of tofu, ground mushrooms, ketchup, textured vegetable protein (for texture) and a bit of Parmesan cheese for sharpness, says executive chef Bill Overdyk. The basic recipe is used at the restaurants owned by Des Moines restaurant legend George Formaro, including Gateway Market & Café, Centro and Django. (He recently opened Zombie Burger.)

CHOICE VEGETABLES AND FLAVORINGS

With the substantive base well in mind, consider the vegetables and flavorings that will compose the best taste.

After settling on risotto, wild rice and lentils as the foundation, McCue considered the flavor and texture of vegetables. He found sweetness in squash and bell peppers, depth from the sulphur of onions and garlic, additional sweetness and pop from herbs added at the end (parsley, chives and scallions) and an additional flavor burst

FLAVORS

with sundried tomatoes pulverized in a food processor, turned into a powder and folded into the mixture. When reconstituted in this form, the sundried tomatoes help hold everything together.

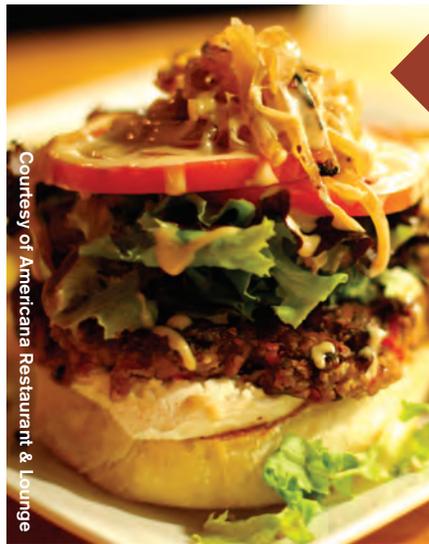
A few vegetable tips McCue learned: Rather than too-chunky diced vegetables or too-runny pureed vegetables, shredding them was the best way to go. They retain some textural and color integrity. Also, sweating the shredded vegetables reduces the moisture, which can be poured into the rice/lentil mixture and kneaded together, retaining some of the nutrients.

The burger base of duxelles combined with lentils and brown rice at 5 Napkin Burger gets additional substance and flavor from shredded zucchini, carrots and beets.

D'Amico also is a big fan of wheat berries, so that signature ingredient, along with sunflower seeds, is added in for crunch, he says. He also adds a Japanese chili sauce to the duxelles for some vibrancy.

Among Formaro's several Des Moines restaurants that feature the same basic tofu-and-mushroom-based veggie burger, each is allowed some variation. At Gateway Market & Café, Overdyk adds ground pecans and cheddar cheese. The textural contrast of the tofu and ground nuts makes it even more interesting. The burger's success, he believes, comes from grinding all the ingredients finely for a cohesive patty with consistent texture throughout.

The Black Bean Burger at Disney's Old Port Royale gets additional Caribbean flavor from habañero chilies, roasted red pepper and fresh cilantro with yellow cornmeal to help bind it together and shredded cheddar cheese for a smooth finish, Cuenin says.



BIND IT TOGETHER

Getting all the ingredients to hold together is one of the trickiest elements of a successful veggie patty.

Eggs are one binder solution, though that disqualifies it from vegan status. Also, when cooked too hot, eggs tend to break down, McCue says. Breadcrumbs and milk are another option.

"I went the route of rice, which has amylose starch that sticks food together like glue," says McCue. Rice also has the flavor profile he wanted, making it the most natural binder choice. Agar-agar could also work; however, consumers interested in ingredient lists might not be familiar with it.

The Quinoa Cakes at Disney's Whispering Canyon Café feature chickpea powder as a binder. After the quinoa is cooked in vegetable stock and made into the form of a sofrito, Vanetti cooks the chickpea powder in vegetable stock to make a slurry, then folds all the items together with fresh herbs, forms it all into sheet pans and chills it. "You have to make sure the chickpea roux is evenly incorporated in the quinoa mixture to prevent lumps, so it's best to mix all the ingredients together while it's warm," Vanetti says.

At 5 Napkin Burger, holding it all together is a fine balancing act. D'Amico's duxelles and lentil/brown rice-based burger with

HOUSE VEGGIE BURGER

Mike Holman, Executive Chef
Americana Restaurant & Lounge
Des Moines, Iowa

Yield: 20-25 burgers

- 1 cup quinoa, uncooked
- ½ cup red lentils
- ½ cup beluga lentils
- 1½ quarts water
- 4 lbs. garbanzo beans, rinsed, drained
- 2 cups walnuts, chopped
- 4 cups breadcrumbs
- 3 cups diced celery
- 3 cups diced red onion
- 4 cups diced red bell pepper
- ½ cup house spice blend or Canadian Steak Seasoning
- 1 oz. apple cider vinegar
- 3-4 T. kosher salt
- 1-2 T. ground black pepper

Method: Cook quinoa and lentils with water until lentils are tender. Put garbanzo beans in bowl of stand mixer; mash briefly on high speed. Add walnuts, breadcrumbs, celery, red onion, red bell pepper, seasoning, vinegar, salt and pepper; mix thoroughly. Portion mixture on patty paper; form into burgers. Bake at 350°F for 20-25 minutes to remove excess moisture. Pan sear for service.

vegetables, wheat berries and sunflower seeds is ultimately bound with egg and panko breadcrumbs. He is careful to remove the excess moisture from the vegetables and to get the right balance with the other ingredients.

The tofu-and-mushroom constitution of the veggie burger at Gateway Market & Café requires some flour to bind it together. "In the process, we work it like dough. It has a soft texture, but it holds together on the grill," Overdyk says.

FINE POINTS

Cooking and freezing veggie patties presents its own challenges. Though it's best to cook



Courtesy of Gateway Market Café

The veggie burger at Gateway Market Café, Des Moines, Iowa, gets much of its flavor from the combination of tofu, ground mushrooms, ketchup and a bit of Parmesan cheese.

them fresh, the amount of time it takes to make them may lead some to prepare a large batch of patties and freeze some. Others may want to make up patties and sell them frozen to guests who request it.

In many cases, it's best to sear off the veggie patties to create a crust before freezing them, McCue says. That helps them to hold together. Otherwise, the moisture in the patty will expand as it freezes, then, when it thaws, it weeps or turns mushy. "Sear it first, cool it down, then freeze," he says.

To reheat frozen patties, McCue recommends using a bit of deli or wax paper and microwaving them to thaw. "If you nuke it for a minute or so, then put it in a saute pan with a bit of fat and put it in the oven or saute at that point, you re crisp the outside and the center is hot and the integrity is maintained."

Most agree that it's best to saute or griddle veggie burgers. They frequently don't hold up well on the grill. Though Gateway Market & Café serves its veggie burger gas-grilled, it is baked ahead of time to set it, Overdyk says.

Jody Shee, an Olathe, Kan.-based freelance writer and editor, previously was editor of a foodservice magazine. She has 20 years of food-writing experience and writes the blog www.sheefood.com.



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