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## Masters of Disguise Among Meatless Burgers By JEFF GORDINIER

THEY were the four syllables that had the power to make both carnivores and [vegetarians](#) cringe: veggie burger.

For meat-lovers, the veggie burger was long seen as a sad stand-in that tried to copy the contours and textures of a classic beef patty while falling pathetically short of the pleasure. And for meat-refusers, the veggie burger served as a kind of penitential wafer: You ate this bland, freeze-dried nutrient disc because you had to eat it (your duty as someone who had forsaken the flesh) and because at many a restaurant or backyard barbecue, it was the only option available.



If that has been your mental framework since the days when [Jerry Garcia](#) was still with us, it might be time to take another bite. To borrow a phrase from the culture that produced it, the veggie burger seems finally to have achieved self-actualization.

Across the country, chefs and restaurateurs have been taking on the erstwhile health-food punch line with a kind of experimental brio, using it as a noble excuse to fool around with flavor and texture and

hue. As a result, veggie burgers haven't merely become good. They have exploded into countless variations of good, and in doing so they've begun to look like a bellwether for the American appetite. If the growing passion for plant-based diets is here to stay, chefs — even in restaurants where you won't find the slightest trace of spirulina — are paying attention.

"I just think it's important to accommodate everybody," said Josh Capon, who opened Burger & Barrel in SoHo last fall and quietly slipped a chickpea-based veggie burger onto a menu heady with pork chops, charcuterie and carpaccio. "And I don't think somebody should feel like they're eating an inferior burger. If you're going to do a veggie burger, it should have that richness and mouth feel and overall texture. When you pick it up, it should eat like a burger."

He will get no argument from Adam Fleischman, the owner of the expanding Umami Burger chain in Los Angeles. Even though his Earth Burger includes no meat, it offers the taste buds a gooey, decadent tradeoff by dandying up a mushroom-and-edamame patty with ricotta, truffle aioli and cipollini onions.

At Cru, a largely [vegan](#) and raw-food-focused cafe in that city's Silver Lake neighborhood, the dietary and structural restrictions only seem to open up pathways of metamorphosis. Cru's South American sliders are made of sprouted lentils and cooked garbanzo beans pulsed with garlic and spices. They're deep-fried, dressed with a mojo sauce of blood orange and paprika and Peruvian aji amarillo chilies, and served on leaves of butter lettuce instead of a bread bun.

"We're trying to stay away from that dry, tasteless veggie burger thing," said Cru's chef, Vincent Krimmel. "We have a lot more to play with now."

Sometimes that sense of play leads to accidental discovery. The three Westville outposts around Manhattan serve a daily array of fresh vegetables. One day about four years ago, Sammy Victoria, a Westville chef, had an impulse to combine some of that garden

produce into little cakes. “It went over amazingly well,” said Jay Strauss, an owner of Westville. “And Sammy said, ‘Let’s try this as a veggie burger — the exact same ingredients, just larger.’” Westville’s deep-fried blend of corn, cauliflower, broccoli, roasted red pepper and other ingredients now sells out on a regular basis.

Gone are the days, it seems, when the veggie burger was almost a source of shame. Sure, some restaurants fixed their own, from scratch, but many others served a dry mass-produced patty — one that might well have been made of natural ingredients like mushrooms and oats and black beans and brown rice, but which nevertheless had been gathering ice crystals in the freezer for an unknown period of time.

Tal Ronnen, 36, the author of the 2009 cookbook “The Conscious Cook,” has seen the frozen versions, too, gradually improve in the ensuing years. (Lately he has collaborated with [Gardein](#) in creating the food company’s new Ultimate Beefless Burger patties.) “When I first started eating this way, they came in a box,” said Mr. Ronnen, a chef who signed on this month to create vegan choices for the restaurants in all of the Wynn and Encore hotels in Las Vegas. “You had to add water to it. It was embarrassing to eat it around anyone. Imagine showing up to a backyard barbecue with a box and saying, ‘Hey, can I have a little bit of water to form a veggie burger?’”

If there is a primary reason they are improving, it comes back to the force that drives just about anything in the marketplace: demand. According to Mintel, a market research firm, there was a 26 percent increase in menu items labeled vegetarian or vegan between the last quarter of 2008 and the same quarter in 2010.



With more and more people pledging themselves to vegan and vegetarian modes of dining, it seems self-defeating for restaurants to ignore them — or to pretend that those diners will be satisfied with yet another droopy grilled-vegetable platter. The signs are clear enough that two high priests of the global burger gospel, Burger King and McDonald’s, have for years given veggie burgers a run, although only Burger King currently has one on menus in the United States.

“It is really awesome to see a lot of places starting to make their own patties from scratch, instead of simply stockpiling pre-made ones in the freezer,” said Joni Newman, the author of a cookbook, “The Best Veggie Burgers on the Planet,” which Fair Winds Press is to publish in May.

But with thousands of flora-based recipes in the world, why the compulsive return to the burger genre? “There’s something really satisfying about a hand-held food that’s served on a bun,” said Lukas Volger, the author of “Veggie Burgers Every Which Way,” a cookbook that was published last year. The patty-bun-condiments format of a burger holds sway over us the same way the dependable verse-chorus-bridge structure of a perfect three-minute pop song does.

That said, there is vigorous debate over how closely a veggie burger should ape the look and taste of beef.

“I never like to tell people that this is going to taste exactly like ground beef, because you’re setting yourself up,” Mr. Ronnen said. “It’s its own thing.”

Chefs might adhere to the architectural limitations of a burger, but within that framework, the challenge of trying to make a veggie burger that tastes good (and doesn’t fall apart) seems to free up their imaginations.

At Blue Smoke, the barbecue restaurant on East 27th Street, the team creates patties out of French lentils, quinoa, carrots, onions and cauliflower and smokes them over hickory. If they seemed like a fluke when they were introduced in 2008, they now feel like a perennial. “It’s one of those items that I wouldn’t take off the menu because there’d be some kind of backlash,” said Kenny Callaghan, the executive chef.

At 5 Napkin Burger, another joint unapologetically devoted to meat, you’ll find a veggie option that derives a loamy richness from mushroom duxelles while getting its ballast from sunflower seeds, wheatberries and brown rice.

When the 5 Napkin team originally tested contenders in their kitchens about three years ago, they found themselves pondering the Zen koan of veggie-patty enlightenment: If a burger is not a burger, how do you make it stick together? “They were falling

apart,” said Andy D’Amico, a chef and partner. “They would just kind of collapse in the roll.” The solution was something familiar to the home meatloaf maker: seal the mix with eggs and panko crumbs.

The veggie-burger pendulum of peril swings between too dry and too wet, and sometimes, achieving the right balance of moisture and texture has to do with knowing which seeds, nuts and vegetables to mash and which ones to leave whole.

There are other challenges. A patty made of puréed vegetables may be healthy, but “you might say it doesn’t have much tang to it,” said Mr. Strauss of Westville. To give it flavor layering, Westville tops the patty with mushrooms and a spicy tartar sauce. (With a successful veggie burger, Mr. Ronnen observed, “so much of it is the condiments.”)

If you need extra evidence that this hippie-town mainstay is venturing into territory that once might have been seen as hostile, look no further than Shula Burger, a chain scheduled to open this summer in Florida. Shula Burger is the latest food enterprise from the family whose patriarch is Don Shula, the legendary football coach. One of his sons, Dave, said in a telephone interview that Shula Burger’s test kitchens were in the midst of “trying a lot of different versions.”

The root conundrum of a veggie burger, he said, comes down to its “bite profile” — or what happens at the moment of impact between teeth and patty. And what bite profile does a restaurant want to avoid? “Picture taking a bite out of a hockey puck,” said Mr. Shula, also a former [N.F.L.](#) coach. “And the other end of the bite profile to avoid is when it’s really squishy and mushy.”

Mr. D’Amico wanted his version, in keeping with the 5 Napkin mission, to have the traditional cheek-smear pleasure of a beef burger. But sometimes it seems as if he’s been almost too successful with that, thanks in part to the incorporation of beets, which give the patty a color reminiscent of rare steak. “I have to tell you that my veggie burger has freaked out some vegetarians,” he said. “They’ve been put off by the color of it. They feel like it looks too much like meat.”

Brian Stefano, the chef at the Hillstone branch on Park Avenue, has had similar moments with the restaurant’s lauded griddled, crispy-exterior version. If you eat one, it’s hard to miss the presence of beans, rice and beets. What’s less obvious is that another ingredient — the one that gives the mix a touch of sweetness and stickiness — is prunes. “We’ve had vegetarians think that it is meat and send it back,” Mr. Stefano said.

Apparently most just chow down, though. The Park Avenue Hillstone, previously known as Houston’s, sells 400 to 500 veggie burgers a week.

“I give them a lot of credit,” Mr. Capon, the chef at Burger & Barrel, said of Hillstone. “Their veggie burger has a little bit of a cult following. I know people who go there just for that.”

Still, Mr. Capon zagged in a different direction. He found inspiration during a Saturday night “family meal” with his cooking crew when Ryan Schmidtberger, the chef de cuisine at another of Mr. Capon’s restaurants, made falafel for the team. In converting the chickpea fritter to a burger, Mr. Capon amped up the herbs, smeared on plenty of tzatziki sauce and chose a coarser, crunchier grind.

Ultimately, how a restaurant rises to the challenge of a veggie burger can be a telling sign of its cooks’ core values.

“It gives you a lot of room to create,” said David Burke, the chef behind New York restaurants like Fishtail and David Burke Kitchen. At Fishtail, Mr. Burke eventually went with the tried-and-true pleasure-delivery system of a portobello mushroom with roasted peppers, basil mayo and mozzarella. “We treat it like an Italian sandwich without the meat,” he said.

Talking about the topic sent Mr. Burke into something of a creative reverie on the phone. “Falafel makes a good burger,” he started musing. “A corn [risotto](#) cake. Even a potato pancake, because a good burger has a little crunch, a little snap.”

That led him to think about creating an altogether different twist on an American icon: something perfect for the summer.

“A veggie lobster roll,” he said. “I’m going to try that.”