

The Twin Cities Burger Tour
Blogger Preview
Marty Andrade

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Preface

I didn't think much of it, when I picked up Jeff Hagen's book "Searching for the Holy Grill." I was traveling around the Midwest at the time for a job and I was able to visit many of the places he suggested in his book, which covered Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa. My friends and I would often make lists of great restaurants in the Twin Cities and someone put two and two together and came up with the idea of having me write a burger tour just for the Twin Cities.

What follows constituted many trials and tribulations on my part and on those around me. Normally one might think an endeavor such as The Twin Cities Burger Tour would be more a joy than work. Well, it was a lot of work. And it was a pleasure exploring hundreds of restaurants throughout Minnesota.

Any large undertaking, even one as simple as this, requires a multitude of contributors. Over the last four years several people have played important roles in forging the burger tour.

Orlando Ochoada was my principle intelligence officer; he scoured the Twin Cities looking for potential burger joints. Often he would visit a restaurant just to try out the burger to see if it warranted further investigation. Mr. Ochoada also pushed harder than anyone else to force me to finish the burger tour. He probably deserves to be listed as a coauthor.

Among many others, thanks is also owed to Marty Wingard, Dan Nelson, Jared Christiansen, Peter Swanson, Jenna Stocker, Alex Newman, Aaron Solem, Hank Long and Steve McComas, all of whom did footwork finding the restaurants that appear in this little book.

Finally, a big thanks is owed to the talented Derek Brigham, who did the cover. At a substantial discount, so he says. To anyone else I might have missed, thank you. Enjoy the tour.

Introduction

This guide has been written to help those attending the Republican National Convention find the best burgers in Minneapolis and St. Paul. I have also included some non-burger restaurants to increase the appeal of this work. The restaurants mentioned in this guide are not aimed at a specific group of people. Whether protestor or convention goer, all people should like good food. Liberals and conservatives, Catholics and Protestants, it is my hope everyone will find this guide useful.

I'd also like to think in some small way, this guide will help the political discourse in this country. In recent years the level of pure vitriol among liberals and conservatives has gotten to the point of incivility. This needs to stop. We all live in this country together; let's come together to feast. And maybe, while we're all enjoying some of the best food the Twin Cities has to offer, we can have rational discourse on the issues affecting us today.

This slim volume has been a tremendous undertaking. The locations in this work have all been personally visited by me, often numerous times. This tour is the summation of several years worth of eating and decreased life expectancy. When I was in college attending the University of Minnesota I made a hobby of visiting a different restaurant every week. This was no small task for a poor college student. At one point I even had the help of a college newspaper (now defunct) and let me tell you there is no greater job in the world than to be a restaurant reviewer. After all the food at all those restaurants, I can tell you the following are among the best restaurants you'll find anywhere.

You might ask why the focus is on burgers. It's not because of some prejudice against other food. Special for the Republican National Convention I have included a section at the back of this work where I provide a list of places where you can enjoy a wide range of food. Everything from Greek food to Italian is included. There's something for everyone in this work, except vegetarians of course.

The real answer is this was supposed to be the first tour in a series of Twin Cities' tours focusing on different foods. Unfortunately the shifting winds of life led me away from the area, but not before I tried out hundreds of restaurants in the area. Burgers were my first focus as they are my personal passion.

Despite the fact the bulk of these locales serve something you could probably pick up at a chain restaurant a block from your hotel I want you to be rest assured all of these restaurants meet standards of quality and taste that reaches far and above anything you'll find at chains.

It might seem this introduction is a bit apologetic. Well, it's not supposed to be. If you don't like burgers then tough, you shouldn't have bought The Twin Cities Burger Tour. The burger is one of the great American foods. As a child my father used to take me out to get Wendy's whenever my mother was working the late shift at the hospital. This is when I fell in love with the burger. Wendy's is great as far as chains go and whenever I want to feel nostalgic I'll swing by for a Classic Single and bring back some of those childhood memories.

My tastes have since expanded. Over the past four years I have turned the burger into an obsession. I literally studied the burger as a philosophical concept. What is the essence of “burger”? What is the “truth” of burger? Is there a “pure” burger? If you think I’m joking you’re wrong. I have an educational background in the liberal arts. I am that pathetic.

The origins of the burger are not well known but there are a few interesting stories behind how a ground beef patty found its way between a bun. You’ll have to look elsewhere to read about the burger creation mythos as it is outside my mission here. Have fun but remember the mystery will probably never be solved. But I think the “why” of the Burger is far more interesting than the “Who, Where, When” debate.

The “why” is America.

America has always been a nation on the go. People were often, whether rightly or wrongly, too busy to sit down and eat. Americans worked long and hard hours in wretched conditions just to earn enough money to live in wretched conditions. By making food portable our ancestors in America were able to gain precious time in their lives; being American that time was typically spent working rather than with family but the point is clear: inhaling a piece of food as we travel from one place to another is American.

The fact the burger is a food for “on the go” shouldn’t prevent you from sitting back and enjoying the offerings from the restaurants on The Tour. These burgers ain’t for running. You’re going to have to sit down for most of these burgers. A few of them are probably too big for anyone but Arnold Schwarzenegger to carry around. The burger may have a genesis as a “to-go” food but it has evolved into a sit-down meal.

Size isn’t the only prerequisite. Taste was the biggest factor in how I graded the locations on the tour. Unfortunately it’s hard to get a real handle on the “taste” of a burger. Burgers are savory. The human tongue is into sweet, bitter, salty. Burgers are generally not sweet or bitter so the tongue is almost useless for analyzing its flavor. The ranges of experience you can get out of a burger are greater than what our tongues alone can discern. A lot of what we think of as “taste” is in fact olfactory. Our noses are what rules. The relative “beefy” flavor of a stereotypical burger is just a mixture of the smells and tastes you experience when eating a burger.

I did my best to upgrade my vocabulary and “expand my awareness” but I really couldn’t find better adjectives for most of these burgers other than “Big, tasty and juicy.” There are some “distinct” tasting burgers on the tour and I address those specifically in the text. I also discuss other qualities other than taste in the tour; everything from atmosphere to service to price gets looked at in the following reviews.

What also needs to be noted is this is in fact a burger tour. It’s not a listing of the very best burgers in the state. Every burger on the tour is a good one and I’m certain I found the best but I don’t claim to have a definitive list. My goals were simply to present to the interested reader locations where one could both tour the Twin Cities and find great burgers doing it.

This book is divided up into three sections. The first section, “Featured Locales” is just what you think it is. They are the best burgers the Twin Cities has to offer. The second group, “The Bench” is a collection of restaurants that would be featured locales except for one or two small flaws. Finally, “The Joints” are for those of you who are interested in more than burgers.

Other than the above division the establishments are in no particular order. There’s no ranking system. One can’t quantify something as subjective as the human palate. There’s no beginning and no end, the Twin Cities Burger Tour simply is.

Featured Locales

Mickey's Diner

36 W. 9th St, St. Paul; (651) 222-5633

1950 7th St W, St Paul, MN; (651) 698-8387

Open 24/7

At one point in my life I was paid to travel around the Midwest in order to recruit college students for whatever evil purposes the Illuminati passed down. It was good work but the hours were odd. I would often find myself on all night driving sessions trying to make an early appointment in some frozen town which happened to have a small college attached. I came to appreciate all night restaurants and diners.

There were many frigid nights where I found myself taking a 3am lunch break at this historic little diner located in downtown St. Paul. It's been open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for over 60 years. Mickey's Diner has weathered every blizzard, flood and "major meteorological event" the state of Minnesota has thrown at it.

The Diner has been featured in several Hollywood movies and among the famous politicians to dine there are former Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura and present California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Mickey's is a Minnesota icon and it is absolutely a "must go" while you're here. Just understand, the burger at Mickey's is not the best one on the tour. Every trip I take to the Twin Cities I eat at Mickey's but I rarely have the burger, I normally go for one of their breakfast specials, which are the best items on their menu.

This is not to say the burger isn't good. It is. Everything at Mickey's is cooked in either butter or vegetable oil and this fact alone makes everything delicious, if not a little rich. If you got your Lipitor, you better take some before heading to Mickey's.

This universe is a large and foreboding place filled with disaster in every corner: Asteroids, comets, mega-volcanoes and Rosie O'Donnell. I take quiet solace in the fact that if the world were coming to an end, I could meet eternity while sitting and enjoying a meal at the counter of Mickey's Diner.

Cafe Lurcat

1624 Harmon Pl,

Minneapolis, MN 55403;

[Get Directions](#)(612) 486-5500

www.cafelurcat.com

As a blue-collar schlub with no pretensions of aristocracy, I can tell you this particular location was very uncomfortable for me. It's very trendy, clean, modern and the clientele is made up entirely of yuppies. This is not the kind of place I would normally go to in my free time. The kind of place I would go in my free time has dirty floors, poor lighting and an atmosphere of impending police intervention. Sure, there are certain people who would feel quite at home sipping an appletini and discussing the latest trends in yachting at Café Lurcat. I just ain't one of those guys.

I was there for the burger. It's not quite like any burger I've ever had, it's not large or juicy. It is very flavorful but quite subtle. In a world dominated by overpowering flavor and size the burger at Café Lurcat is indescribable. The bun has a distinct potato flavor to it yet I know it's not potato bread; the burger so confuses my senses that it frustrates me to try to write about it.

Here's what I can say: Lurcat is a cozy if not pretentious restaurant with exceptional service and a burger which is delicious if not describable. If you're looking for something different and an atmosphere which engages the bourgeois-bohemian senses I'd put Café Lurcat on the "go" list.

Band Box Diner

729 S 10th St,

*Minneapolis, MN; (612) 332-0850**

Closes around 4pm

Located just a few blocks away from the Metrodome, this little diner sports one of my favorite burgers. Made of chopped steak and cooked in a thick film of grease, the burger has a thick crunchy and almost caramelized shell with a perfect center of well cooked but still juicy meat. It's very flavorful and the high quality of the chopped steak separates this burger from others on the tour.

Don't overdo this burger; it doesn't need a lot of extras. If you try to add a lot of cheese and salt and vegetables to it you're really taking away from this burger. My suggestion is just add a little bit of black pepper and just a touch of ketchup. You don't need cheese or anything else to make this masterpiece taste good.

The Band Box Diner has been in it's location in the Elliot Park Neighborhood since the 1930's. An honest retailer couldn't call this locale "cozy" because it is downright small. It's not much more than a burger stand with a covered seating area. No matter where you sit you are practically on top of the grease covered grill. This intimate setting is a great experience and this burger is one of the best in Minneapolis.

The Bench

The Cardinal Restaurant and Bar

2920 E. 38th St.

Minneapolis, MN; 612-724-5837

www.cardinaltaavern.com

Let's suppose you're on the way home and you're taking our light rail line to the airport. You've enjoyed a week of politicalness and whatnot but you didn't hit all the restaurants you wanted to. In fact, you failed to try out the famous "Jucy Lucy" during your stay. It's something I told you to do but alas, you're running out of time. Fortunately for you there is a bar and grill on the light rail line which serves a pretty good Jucy Lucy. The Cardinal Restaurant and Bar will be your saving grace.

Twin City Grill

Mall of America

Located on first floor on the North Side

(952) 854-0200

It'd be a crime against the economy of Minnesota not to find some excuse to send you to the Mall of America. Not that the Twin City Grill isn't a good reason to spend some time at the temple of Midwest capitalism. The service is exemplary and the quality of the burger is what you would expect from an exclusive club of the bourgeois. The burger is worthy of the tour but, like everything at the mall, it isn't exactly a bargain. Hey, it's only money.

50's Grill

5524 Brooklyn Blvd

Brooklyn Center; (763) 560-4947

11am-10pm

This might just be another 50's themed restaurant but what first caught my eye about this location was the attention to detail. Objects which were in my grandparent's home are all over the place. I give points to authenticity; this 50's throwback restaurant did their homework. The other clichés of good restaurants apply: good service, good food. The burger is completely satisfying as is every visit to the 50's Grill.

Cedar Inn

4155 Cedar Ave S

Minneapolis, MN; (612) 729-9785

Cedar Inn is a local bar in south Minneapolis for racing and motorcycle enthusiasts. There is no pretense, no sophistication; the Cedar Inn is a bar for bar people. Solipsists need not apply. The burger isn't the largest, it isn't made to order, it doesn't come with fancy fixins' and if you don't like it the complaint department is located outside. This is what I love about the Cedar Inn. I also love the burger, which for it's lack of nuance is a textbook of unhealthy. The bun, which isn't baked fresh, is soaked in grease and butter and toasted to heart-bypass goodness. The medium-well burger patty has a crispy on the outside, juicy on the inside quality to it.

The Joints

The Grandview Grill

1818 Grand Ave, St Paul

(651) 698-2346

If you're looking for a hearty breakfast, this is the place to go. I couldn't believe the size of the portions when I received my order of the Cajun Breakfast. It was huge. After a breakfast at Grandview you might not need to eat the rest of the day. The Cajun breakfast is very spicy and the condiments on every table include Tabasco and chili sauces. They have lunch selections as well but I wouldn't want anything more from Grandview Grille than the finest meal of the day: Breakfast.

The Village Wok

610 Washington Avenue S.E.

Minneapolis, MN; (612) 331-9041

www.cheung.bizland.com

It frightens me how fast the food at the Village Wok is served. You sit down, you order, someone brings you some tea and before you can think about anything else your food is delivered. Open late, Village Wok is an excellent insomniac source of Chinese food. I prefer the chicken lo mien with an order of fried cheese wontons, but the selection is vast. I always stick to the American favorites but there are some more authentic selections including an entire menu of Cantonese dishes. The Wok doesn't serve the absolute best Chinese food, but for the speed, convenience and price it can't be beat.