

THE BURGER IN AMERICA

100th Birthday of the Burger

Compiled by James McNair



- 1800s German immigrants who settled along the Ohio River brought along their recipes for beef cooked in the style of Hamburg, Germany's largest seaport. Chopped beef in the form of steak tartare had arrived in Hamburg via sailors returning from Russia perhaps as early as the 14th century. Hamburg cooks experimented with variations on the Russian dish, but their broiled version of beef cooked with onions became the favorite preparation.
- Stands along the New York City harbor that were frequented by German sailors offered "steak cooked in the Hamburg style."
- 1834 "Hamburger Steak" was listed at 10 cents, one of the costliest items on the menu, at Delmonico's in New York.
- 1884 The *Boston Journal* quoted a local chef's reference to chopped "Hamburg steak," the first published reference to the beef patty.
- 1885 Local legend of Seymour, Wisconsin, maintains that 15-year-old Charlie Nagreen invented the hamburger sandwich when he sold hamburger steaks from an ox-drawn wagon at the Outgamie County Fair, placing them between slices of white bread so that diners could eat while they strolled the fairgrounds. He continued to sell his creation at the county fair for the next 65 years.
- Late 1880s Oral histories credit Fletcher Davis, known as "Old Dave," with creating an unnamed sandwich of hamburger steak between slices of warm home-baked bread at his lunch counter in Athens, Texas. Davis spread a mixture of ground mustard and mayonnaise on the sandwich and topped the beef with a slice of Bermuda onion and cucumber pickles.
- 1889 The *Walla Walla (Washington) Union* referred to "hamburger steak" on the menu of a local restaurant, confirming that the chopped beefsteak had spread from coast to coast.
- 1892 Descendants of Frank Menches of Akron, Ohio, purport that Menches, a county fair concessionaire known for great sausage sandwiches, substituted seasoned ground beef one day when sausage was unavailable from his butcher and served the broiled patties on bread. (His 1951 obituary in *The Los Angeles Times* acknowledged him as the "inventor" of the hamburger.)
- 1896 Fanny Farmer's *Boston Cooking School Cook Book* published the first recipe for hamburger steak.
- 1897 Chefs who wished to offer a more upscale dish than hamburger steaks applied the fancy moniker "Salisbury steak" to a chopped beef patty seasoned with onion and served with gravy. It was named for Dr. James Salisbury, a physician and nutritionist who advocated a diet of broiled lean beef three times a day to ward off numerous diseases.
- 1900 The family of Louis Lassen maintains that he invented the hamburger at his tiny Louis Lunch counter in New Haven, Connecticut, when he formed sandwiches of thinly sliced steak trimmings and served them between white bread slices. The Library of Congress accepted this local legend, but eyewitnesses identified the sandwich as thinly sliced steak on bread.

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- 1904 The hamburger makes its official debut at The St. Louis World's Fair (The Louisiana Purchase Exposition). The *New York Tribune* reported that the new sandwich was "the innovation of a food vendor on the pike (midway)." McDonald's research center, Hamburger University, concluded that an anonymous food vendor at the fair was the first to introduce the sandwich to the public. Recent research and a photograph of "Old Dave's Hamburger Stand" located across from a living exhibit of Geronimo and other aging Native American warriors indicate that the unnamed vendor was most likely Fletcher Davis from Athens, Texas. Local legend there suggests that his customers raised money to send Davis and his wife to St. Louis for the fair.
- Following the fair, the hamburger spread quickly throughout America, popularized at portable lunch wagons and carts, diners, soda fountains, luncheonettes, and greasy spoons that popped up everywhere to serve the rapidly expanding work force.
- 1916 J. Walter Anderson, a cook in Wichita, Kansas, flattened the traditional hamburger steak into a thinner patty that could be cooked quickly and created individual buns to substitute for sliced bread. He opened a hamburger stand in a converted trolley-car diner, where he sold small, square burgers for a nickel each and encouraged customers to "buy 'em by the sack."
- During World War I, the politically incorrect German name of hamburger was generally replaced with "Salisbury steak" (see 1897) for the duration of the war.
- 1917 Full-sized hamburgers served on buns appeared on the menu of Drexel's Pure Food Restaurant in Chicago.
- 1921 J. Walter Anderson, in partnership with Billy Ingram, opened his fourth 5-cent hamburger outlet and named it White Castle, which became America's first fast-food hamburger chain, offering a standardized look, menu and service. White Castle pioneered the use of advertising to sell hamburgers and was the birthplace of the disposable paper hat for food servers. White Castle's success led to scores of imitators, including White Clocks, White Diamonds, White Domes, White Huts, White Manas, White Towers, Royal Castles, King's Castles and The Krystal.
- The Pig Stand, America's first drive-in restaurant, opened in Dallas, Texas, delivering hamburgers and other sandwiches by servers dubbed "carhops" from their practice of hopping onto auto running boards to take orders and delivering them on trays that hung over the windows.
- 1924 The first cheeseburger may have been prepared at Rite Spot in Pasadena, California.
- 1929 J. Wellington Wimpy appeared in Popeye comic strips, stating "I would gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today." The character was so popular that hamburgers became known as wimpy burgers, possibly the first use of the shortened term "burger" for the sandwiches. A burger chain named for Wimpy soon followed.
- 1930s Streamlined drive-ins with large overhangs to protect the carhops were perfected in California. Roller skates, used first by gas station attendants, speeded up carhop service in many drive-ins.
- 1933 White Castle introduced the first frozen hamburger patties.
- 1934 Steak and Shake carried the drive-in concept to the East Coast.
- 1935 Louis Ballast of Humpty-Dumpty Drive-In in Denver, Colorado, applied unsuccessfully to trademark the name "cheeseburger" after cheese was first used on hamburgers.
- 1936 Bob Wian opened Bob's Pantry, a hamburger lunch counter, in Glendale, California.

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- 1937 The double-decker burger was created by Bob Wian, who named it “Big Boy” after a rather large lad who cleaned the restaurant in exchange for burgers. The sandwich proved so popular that Wian changed the restaurant’s name to Bob’s Big Boy, and he soon became the nation’s first hamburger-franchising mogul.
- Brothers Richard and Maurice McDonald opened a drive-in in Arcadia, California, first selling hot dogs and orange juice, and quickly added hamburgers to the menu.
- 1938 Hamburger Heaven opened on East 51st Street in New York City and became a favorite hangout of the rich and famous, who were fans of the prime beef burgers and the one-person booths.
- 1940 The McDonald brothers moved their drive-in building to San Bernardino, California.
- 1941 The California Supreme Court ruled that a “hamburger sandwich is the type of food frequently offered for sale to and desired by persons who wish to eat something while walking about. It is not the type of food generally ordered by a person who patronizes a hotel, restaurant, or other public eating establishment with the intention of securing a ‘meal.’ It may not be said that one has ‘served’ a meal who merely prepares a sandwich for consumption, wraps it in a paper napkin, and hands it to a purchaser without offering any facilities for its consumption on the premises...”
- With America’s entry into World War II, women became carhops and counter servers to fill the jobs that had been exclusively men’s work. Sexy uniforms were introduced a bit later.
- 1948 The McDonald brothers eliminated carhop service, dishes, glasses, flatware, and a varied menu, and converted their drive-in into the world’s first self-service burger bar, pioneering the concept of prepackaged burgers with no condiment choices and with ready-cooked fries and drinks in a hurry.
- Harry and Esther Snyder opened In-N-Out Burger in Baldwin Park, California, the first drive-through burger stand.
- 1949 Googies in Los Angeles introduced modernistic architecture that inspired numerous imitators and shifted the emphasis from car service to indoor dining known as Coffee Shop Modern.
- 1950s The hamburger became symbolic of America around the world.
- Backyard burger cookouts developed into a favorite pastime, and magazines and cookbooks offered numerous recipes for making burgers at home.
- Drive-ins introduced electronic ordering devices.
- 1951 Jack-in-the-Box opened its first location in San Diego, California.
- 1952 Weber introduces the first kettle grill for backyard cookouts.
- George Reed patented the Insta-Burger Broiler in Hollywood, California, which made it possible to quickly cook large quantities of burgers.
- 1953 First McDonald brother’s franchise featuring a modern red-and-white building with gigantic golden arches opened in Phoenix, Arizona. The chain’s success quickly spawned countless imitators.
- 1954 McDonald brothers granted exclusive U.S. franchise rights to Ray Kroc.
- James McLamore and David Edgerton opened the first Burger King in Miami.

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- 1955 Ray Krock opened his first McDonald's franchise in Des Plaines, Illinois.
- 1957 White Castle introduced holes in burger patties for faster cooking.
- Burger King introduced the Whopper®.
- Burger King was first chain to offer dining room seating.
- 1959 Troy Smith opened Sonic Drive-In in Shawnee, Oklahoma (still operating as the largest chain of drive-ins with carhops and America's 5th largest burger chain).
- 1961 Ray Kroc bought out the McDonald brothers for \$2.7 million.
- 1963 McDonald's served the chain's one-billionth burger on "The Art Linkletter Show."
- 1965 McDonald's Corporation went public. It's "You deserve a break today" theme song ranked second only to the national anthem in public recognition.
- Prime Burger took over the Hamburger Heaven site in New York City.
- 1967 General Foods purchased the Burger Chefs chain, Pillsbury bought Burger King, and Ralston Purina acquired Jack in the Box.
- 1968 McDonalds introduced the Big Mac®.
- 1969 Dave Thomas opens first Wendy's, named after his daughter, in Columbus, Ohio, offering made-to-order square burgers.
- 1970 Wendy's introduced the drive-through window with its separate cooking area.
- 1974 Burger King introduced their "Have it your way" slogan.
- 1981 Paul Wenner of Gresham, Oregon, created the vegetarian Gardenburger.
- 1982 The big three – McDonalds, Burger King, and Wendy's – launched the media burger wars.
- 1984 Restaurant trade journals hailed "gourmet burgers" as the year's biggest trend. Creative chefs added burgers made from protein other than beef to their menus, or created gourmet beef burgers.
- Wendy's introduced it's "Where's the Beef?" advertising campaign.
- 1992 *James McNair's Burgers* (Chronicle Books) featured recipes from the first two Build a Better Burger cook-offs and from celebrity chefs, including Michael Chiarello, Cindy Pawlcyn, Paul Prudhomme, Judy Rodgers, Jeremiah Tower, and Alice Waters.
- 2002 Expensive, luxury-ingredients burger wars among New York chefs made big news, with prices soaring to \$41 at Mark Sherry's Old Homestead and \$50 for a truffled burger at Daniel Boulud's DB Bistro Moderne.
- 2003 Americans ate an average of 3 hamburgers per week per person.

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