

# The perfect burger is all about flavor

The test:

Taste  
the meat,  
the cheese,  
the bun

BY GUY HAND

SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN

Try this test before biting into your next burger: Break off a chunk of meat and taste it. Does that unadorned bit of burger have a deep, beefy flavor or the flat taste of filler? Next try the cheese (and don't mistake saltiness for flavor). Does that cheddar or swiss have the complexity of real cheese or is it merely a greasy, cheese-like pretender? How about that bun?

Deconstruct enough burgers and you'll probably realize, as I did, that too many American burgers mask insipid ingredients with buckets of add-ons, condiments and bulk sauces.

The final product may end up edible, even pleasant to a palate raised on the stuff, but trust me, burgers built on quality ingredients taste better. It's just food physics.

Of the five cheeseburgers I have the space to mention here, three passed the deconstruction test.

Two did not: Red Robin Gourmet Burgers, which Statesman readers consistently vote as having the best burgers in town, and the brand-new Five Guys



**SHAWN RAECKEL** (@sraeckel@idahostatesman.com) Kayla Dorris of Boise, 5, holds up a Big Jud's beefy quarter pound cheeseburger. The cheeseburger comes with catsup, mayo, mustard, pickle, onion, tomato and lettuce for \$3.99.

Burgers and Fries, an East Coast franchise with hundreds of outlets. Both were built from burger patties, cheddar cheese and buns that simply lacked flavor in close comparison to the three shops that follow and, at \$8.49 and \$4.99 respectively, they weren't even the best bargain.

The amiably funky Big Jud's takes that prize while serving burgers with far more fundamental flavor. Earlier this year, the Food

Network named this beige little box of a place the source of Idaho's best burger thanks to its massive Big Jud Special (\$14.99 for a full pound of beef).

I can't vouch for that statewide accolade, but I can say that the meat on the more sanely sized cheeseburger (\$3.49) was beefy, and its overall flavor reminiscent of the honest, unpretentious mom-and-pop joints of my pre-chain youth.

The "big" at 5-month-old Big Bird's Burgers doesn't refer to the size of the servings but to owner Ken Solts' nickname (you only have to glance near the register at the old photo of his lanky young frame and red afro to see why). Solts buys pre-formed patties (sadly, none of the places I visited chopped their own meat), but he does marinate them, which gives his Big Bird Burger (\$4.59) a pleasingly bold flavor. With a sesame

studded bun, seasoned mayonnaise, ketchup, pickle, tomato slice and cheese, it's a traditional burger with a handmade vibrancy that stands out from the Fairview Avenue fast-food pack.

Now, I haven't talked fries yet, but Big Bird's deserve a mention. Solts hand-cuts Idaho Russets, dips them in a dry batter, deep fries them and, finally, seasons them with spices. That gives Big Bird's fries (\$4.99) a bumpy, crunchy texture that I found more than slightly addictive. They were good even without the pleasantly spicy fry sauce that came with them.

Idaho Fry Company — which will be renamed Boise Fry Company next month — has built its young reputation on fries. It has eight very tasty varieties cut in any of four different styles. But its burgers (\$5.79 for a cheeseburger) stood up better than any to my deconstruction test. Co-owner Riley Huddleston has worked in high-end restaurants including Gramercy Tavern in New York, and he says he didn't abandon that training in his turn toward more humble fare. Idaho Fry's beef is beefy, its cheese tangy, and it comes with a tartly sweet red onion gastrique, garlic aioli, and a topping of bright, baby lettuce leaves. The buns are custom made by Gaston's Bakery in Boise.

Some may find these smallish burgers set on their artificial plastic plates a bit precious. They certainly don't have the molten rivers of processed cheese and cheap sauce that ooze from the av-



## TRY 'EM YOURSELF

**Red Robin Gourmet Burgers:** 267 N. Milwaukee St., Boise (near Emerald Road) and more than 400 other locations.

**Five Guys Burgers and Fries:** 1587 N. Milwaukee St., Boise (near Fairview Avenue).

**Big Jud's:** 1289 Protest Road, Boise (near Boise Avenue).

**Big Bird's Burgers:** 2031 E. Fairview Ave., Meridian (between Locust Grove and Eagle Road).

**The Idaho Fry Company:** 111 Broadway Ave., Boise (near Warm Springs Avenue).

erage burger. But take a bite. There's flavor all the way through that thing — and a reminder that even with this most common of American street foods, quality counts.

Guy Hand's "Edible Idaho" radio show will be back on NPR News '91.5 in September. E-mail him at [guyhand@mwfoodnews.com](mailto:guyhand@mwfoodnews.com).