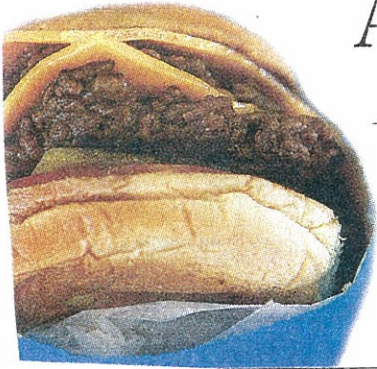


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SERVING CENTRAL ILLINOIS SINCE 1855

Appetite for 'better burgers' shows no satiety



FALLS CHURCH, VA. (AP) — With a drive-through seemingly on every corner, you might think the market for burgers long ago reached saturation. But the fastest-growing restaurant chain in America last year was Five Guys, which specializes in

double-pattied behemoths the size of a softball. And that's just the tip of the arugula. So-called "better burger" joints are one of the fastest-growing parts of the restaurant industry. Celebrity chef Bobby Flay launched Bobby's Burger Palace in the Northeast. Elevation Burger

is expanding into Kuwait. Mooyah Burgers & Fries, Meatheads and the Shake Shack are looking to expand. Higher-grade beef, fresher or more creative toppings, and better buns are bringing customers in the door. The Washington, D.C., area has emerged as fertile ground

for ground chuck. Five Guys, the earliest success story, is based in Lorton, Va., Elevation Burger in Arlington, and BGR-The Burger Joint in Lansdowne. Ray's Hell Burger, also in Arlington, is not a chain,

Please see **BURGERS**, Page A7

BURGERS

Continued from Page A1

but the restaurant run by iconoclastic chef Michael Landrum earned a national profile with President Barack Obama taking Vice President Joe Biden and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev there last month. (Medvedev's review: "Not quite healthy, but it's very tasty.")

It's a market that has room to grow. Such chains represent only about 2 percent of the \$65 billion burger market, said Darren Tristano, executive vice president of Chicago-based restaurant consultant Technomic.

"The traditional players — McDonald's, Burger King and Wendy's — have really shifted their focus away from burgers to breakfast, chicken and beverages," said Tristano. He predicts better burger chains will continue to have double-

digit sales growth for at least the next few years.

The founder of Denver-based Smashburger, fast-food industry veteran Tom Ryan, was keenly aware that Americans were hungry for higher-quality fast-food burgers.

The company did extensive research with fast-food customers who reported that the burgers they ate were mostly a matter of convenience. "It's not the burger I crave; it's the burger I use," Ryan said. Smashburger has expanded to 70 stores in 15 states in just three years.

Customers are willing to pay to ease that craving. A Five Guys burger runs anywhere from \$4 to \$6, and some charge more.

Five Guys, like others, sells the fact that its burgers are never frozen — the stores don't even have freezers, only coolers. Elevation Burger uses organic, grass-fed beef and sells fries

cooked in olive oil. BGR uses a mix of dry-aged beef.

Despite recent success of better burgers, one of the oldest names in the business has fallen on hard times. Fuddrucker's filed for bankruptcy protection in April. Tristano said he thinks Fuddrucker's problems resulted from large restaurants with high real estate costs.

By contrast, most of the successful better-burger operators locate in low-cost strip malls. It can cost less than \$500,000 to open most better-burger franchises, a third of a McDonald's or Burger King.

Mark Bucher, the founder and vice chairman of BGR The Burger Joint, said he plans to keep BGR in the Mid-Atlantic region for now.

"The gourmet burger industry will be survival of the fittest," Bucher said. "Those companies that are getting into the business now are five years too late."

Five Guys' sizzling expansion had a long prep time.

"It isn't anything we wanted to do. We just kind of got pulled that way" after would-be franchisees continually pitched the concept, founder Jerry Murrell said. He opened his first store in 1986, and through 2001, the company expanded to just five locations — one for each of Murrell's five sons.

Murrell didn't think Five Guys' cooking lent itself to easy replication. The potatoes were flown in fresh but often had slightly different starch contents that required tweaks in cooking times. Burger patties are always hand-formed. But he relishes the competition.

"If I were choose between opening in a town with 100 burger places and one with none, I'd go to the place with 100 burger places. People eat burgers in that town," Murrell said. "I like being next to McDonald's."