

Burger bites: There's life beyond the grill

Leigh Cort
Table Talk

The dining scene is continually evolving with cool, hip, fun, themed menus and specialty foods to bring us tasty indulgences from morning to late night.



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Table Talk
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I'm particularly enamored with the resurgence of the American burger that could be griddled and topped with the effortlessness of

ketchup and pickles or pan-seared foie gras and daylily tubers. Whether dining in a secluded patio, urban oasis, sports bar, beachfront shack or rooftop penthouse, there are culinary victories and vittles that celebrate the humble burger just for our pleasure.



The i-Bun from Bistro de Leon—after it has been cut to reveal its savory contents.

Provided by Leigh Cort

Bistro de Leon

www.bistrodeleon.com

Introducing Chef Jean-Stephane Poi-

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Photos provided by Leigh Cort

The i-Bun arrives uncut and topped with sesame seeds.

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ard's i-Bun. A burger like no other, it's tucked into a hand-made brioche bun and baked to order. I knew this dining experience was going to be unique since the Bistro has won praise since its opening five years ago in the heart of St. Augustine. Chef Poinard grew up in Lyon, France, a fifth generation chef and restaurateur. His authentic cuisine exudes a vibe of relaxation and creativity. Local green market ingredients

continually inspire amazing tastes for brunch, lunch and dinner. His culinary signature is complex flavors in breads and pastries too.

I wasn't surprised to find him in the kitchen preparing the brioche pastry himself, singing as he prepared ingredients for my i-Bun: his new and innovative hot sandwich with all of the luscious flavors baked inside. Freshly ground Black Angus beef, caramelized onions, cheese, homemade ketchup and cherry tomatoes. When I sliced into the bun, it burst with the blended aromas of hot bread and savory in-



Juicy Bacon Cheeseburger with Crinkle Fries at Players Grille

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redients. I could have picked it up and held it with one hand, but I was prepared to share it with people sitting near me. They too were fascinated with the flawlessly shiny egg-washed sesame-seeded bun. The plate was garnished with a small salad and the Bistro's homemade sweet pickles, another surprising gastronomic treat (\$9.50).

One i-Bun wasn't enough to satisfy my palate since I shared tastes with others at my table. Jean-Stephane was baking 'Black & Bleu Burgers' that featured homemade bleu cheese crème. It was worth the short wait. I sipped a glass of wine and read

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about his special early evening dinner (5:30-6:30pm). Chef creates a 3-course dinner (daily appetizer, entrée and dessert) with a glass of wine for \$24.95. Within minutes I enjoyed another luscious i-Bun topped with crispy flakes of onion.

I know that I've discovered one of America's soon-to-be newest food crazes. Six more i-Buns were packed to go. We were heading to a sporting event and I counted the minutes until we tailgated with other foodie friends who were waiting for a delicious new delicacy!

Players Grille

www.playersgrille.com

This is truly a family sports bar where the neighborhood meets. On Hendricks Avenue midway between San Marco and Baymeadows, Rose & George Sarkees have been having as much fun as their patrons for fourteen years. It takes at least two visits to enjoy the sports memorabilia, 40 TVs and fun environment that has made Players Grille one of the most popular places to have lunch and dinner daily and weekend brunch. There's a game room for the kids, TVs in every booth, full liquor bar for the adults, plus 50+ bottled and draft beers on tap. Rose is known for her homemade soups and a diverse casual menu that's equally old-fashioned yet present-day. Everyone loves their hand-dipped milkshakes and juicy half-pound burgers (which is incidentally the Monday night special, \$6.99, with a mound of fries).

Revered for his smokin' talent, George Sarkees fires up the big grill daily for irresistible spare ribs and a variety of hand chosen meats. Rib fans drive from a distance when they get a taste for killer smoked wings and things. If you're a trivia nut or Texas Hold 'Em fan, there's something happening almost every night of the week in the open dining area or private party room. Nobody could take care of their guests better than Rose; she even has a TV in the men's room so sport fans don't miss a play.

Hot Shot Bakery n' Café

www.HotShotBakery.com

Sherry Stoppelbein has been feeding St. Augustine visitors, locals and fans for 30+ years, from catering events and creating award-winning specialty cakes to her current and most popular restaurant in the heart of the historic district on Granada Street. While you sit inside with a window view of the Lightner Museum or outside on the back verandah with a view of the Villa Zorayda, Sherry personally prepares delicious hot paninis, wraps in a garlic herb wrap, soups-of-the-day (don't miss her fab Minorcan Chowder or Steak and Potato) and signature creations



Cowsant Burger on Croissant with homemade pickles at Hot Shot Bakery

Photos provided by Leigh Cort

inspired by her regular customers. My choice would be The Hubba Panini (\$6.50) with turkey, cream cheese, provolone, sliced apples and her Spicy Datil Pepper Jelly.

Hot Shot's luscious sandwich is a Cowsant Burger on Croissant served with homemade pickles and Datil B Good's "Sloppy Good BBQ Glaze" (\$7.95). In this tiny little café, there's a lot of hand-crafted culinary wizardry taking place. The dessert display features everything made by Sherry, and I dare you to just choose one. Don't miss cupcake happy hour every Wednesday from 2:00-3:00 pm offering two cupcakes for the price of one. And you must enter her Wall of Flame competition by eating a dark chocolate-covered datil pepper. Sherry herself is exactly what her Datil B Good gourmet line is: hot, sweet and sassy.

The Backyard (of Meehan's Irish Pub)

www.MeehansIrishPub.com

At the crossroads of Hypolita Street and Avenida Menendez in St. Augustine, John Meehan is well known at the proprietor of Meehan's Irish Pub. His alter ego embraces the spirit of the Virgin Islands (many of his favorite years in St. Thomas and St. John), so behind Meehan's Irish Pub lucky patrons have discovered his Caribbean-themed 'Backyard' on Charlotte Street. Slip into island time with a colorful, fun vibe of tropical gardens and fire pit tables



"The Big Jake" at Meehan's

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under the live oaks. Lunch, dinner and late night are served with a front row seat to trolleys, horses and carriages and people watching. You'll get into the mood with a giant Shark Tank for two (citrus rum, Blue Curacao, Sprite, pineapple juice and topped with 151 proof rum).

The Backyard menu has its own distinctive specialties from conch fritters and Caribbean crispy shrimp to Jamaican Jerk game hen and seafood etouffee. The Backyard Burger is luscious but if you care to order from Meehan's menu, you'll have a delicious dilemma: there are eight more signature burgers that pay homage to John's friends and hearty appetites. The definitive balance of Irish Pub and Caribbean Backyard is the Big Jake Double Loaded Burger: a half pound of fresh ground beef and a Reuben Sandwich with all the trimmings! (\$16).

P.S. Don't forget to take home your little rubber Shark!

Poe's Tavern

www.poestavern.com

If you love to read and enjoy eating flawlessly crafted burgers with a clever twist, this tavern may be for you. Poe's Tavern isn't just for fans of Edgar Allan Poe's haunting stories. Although you



Photos provided by Leigh Cort

The Sleeper" – Roasted Garlic Blue Cheese & Buffalo Shrimp at Poe's Tavern

might want to race to the bookstore to find his Murder in the Rue Morgue, I'm not sure the book can equal the incredible Rue Morgue burger that is served bunless with fries, Edgar's Drunken Chili, queso and fried egg' (\$11.75). Sit inside or out on Atlantic Boulevard in Atlantic Beach and order a signature

burger named after one of his famous books, from the Raven and Pit & Pendulum to the Tell-Tale Heart and The Sleeper (\$11.25).

Chef Jimmy Coste arrived here in 2012, directly from the original Poe's Tavern on Sullivan's Island, S.C. His kitchen doesn't own a freezer and

everything is made fresh and ready to escort the gourmet beef burgers, chicken breast sandwiches (prepared with the same luscious accompaniments) and vegan black bean veggie burgers. Served on fresh butter-grilled brioche buns, the plates are splendidly accented by hand-cut French fries, potato salad or marinated bacon-blue cheese slaw.

Popular Fish Tacos round out the menu with shareable appetizers including quesadillas and Edgar's Nachos, prepared with homemade guacamole and pico de gallo, four salads and fish chowder. Poe's Tavern only needs two signature desserts to please a crowd: decadent chocolate midnight cake and traditional homemade key lime pie. Beer lovers rejoice: with 20 craft beers on tap and 50 bottled options, they support local breweries right here in Jacksonville. A raven whispered eerily to me that I shouldn't forget to mention the Drunken Chili made with Yeungling!

J. Alexander's

www.jalexanders.com

J. Alexander's is one of the most popular straightforward American food restaurants in Jacksonville, located in the epicenter of dining at the Town Center. Whether strolling over after a day or evening of shopping or handing your car keys to the valet, there is a warm welcome from a cadre of professional staff taking your reservation or leading you to a comfy booth. Once inside, the restaurant is a masterpiece of synchronicity. From managers and servers to the open kitchen and culinary team, you can always expect the highest quality food with outstanding knowledgeable service.

Three burgers captured my heart, all served with a mound of crispy thin fries. The So Cal (of course SOouthern CALifornia) is garnished with a plentiful portion of fresh sliced avocado, baby arugula, Monterey Jack cheese and Thousand Island dressing. Next, the Steak Burger is hand-crafted with meticulously ground rib eye, filet and New York strip steak. It's a memorable tasting burger with caramelized onions, Monterey Jack cheese and Thousand Island dressing. Finally, the Old Fashioned Cheeseburger is a hefty nearly double-decker with Tillamook cheese, red onion, tomato and leaf lettuce (\$12).

All of J. Alexander's meats are ground at least twice a day for the freshest preparation, along with fresh-from-the-farm vegetables, hand-cut local fish and desserts made in the kitchen. Their modestly priced menu seems too good to be true especially when you watch the mouth-watering dishes being delivered to their tables. Executive Chef Kevin Clayton elevates ingredients to their highest and best use! The perfect partnership to all of the burgers is Intuition Pale Ale (\$6), a Jacksonville-based craft brewery that specializes in small-batch handcrafted ales that have flavor.

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