

MAKING CULINARY HISTORY

Garbanzo Grill offers new take on veggie burgers BY ANDREW HITZ

The world of street fare has changed radically over the past few years. It used to be that the guy selling tacos on the street corner was a tourist amenity — eye candy for visitors of the global South where the tap water wasn't even potable. The string of hot dog vendors in New York City would incite rancor in even the most inexperienced foodies — denouncing them as imitators of a national and regional staple. Since when has street food been a viable part of culinary history, or even been viewed as a part of community? Probably never, until now.

But recently the food cart has been experiencing a reconstitution. It's been relabeled as a financially feasible venue for culinary visionaries or chefs that have great ideas for food, but not the resources to produce them. Jon Terry and Jeaninne Navratil's Garbanzo Grill is a vehicle for just such an idea.

When Terry set out a decade ago to make a veggie burger, he had a notion of what he wanted to create. But even more than that, the lauded Aspen chef had a plethora of commercially available examples of what not to create.

"I wanted a medium-rare burger," Terry said. "And I thought about them literally decades. You know, I'm eating the Morning Star Farm burgers and the Boca burgers and I'm thinking to myself, 'God, you have to have a degree in chemical engineering to figure out how to make these.' And I'm thinking, 'I don't really like them — they're thin, they're dry.' What would I be able to do that would be different?"

Terry began experimenting with seitan, a Japanese and Chinese wheat meat, as a base for his patties. Seitan, however, has something of a "squeaky cheese" bite profile, and proved unsuitable. While still sticking to his wheat-gluten base, Terry handcrafted a proprietary burger that resembles seitan but has the mouth-feel and smokiness of a charbroiled beef patty. He began incorporating mushrooms and onions into the patty as well, both hickory-and-mesquite smoked for upwards of five hours.

Terry knows how good his burgers are, and he definitely doesn't shy away from letting others know. As new customers eye the menu outside the cart next to the Tiny Tavern, he or Navratil always urge them to try the burger; "It's why he started this," Navratil will say. And though the menu centers on Terry's burger, the other options on his all-vegan menu are just as mouthwatering. The BBQ, for example, has thinly sliced layers of wheat meat topped with grilled onions and red cabbage coleslaw, which adds a completely different textural complexity to the sandwich. It's given a proper dousing with Terry's house-made spicy sauce and enveloped in a perfectly crisped (and locally made) bun. I ate the whole menu in one sitting and spun my taste buds out for nearly a week.

The degree to which everything at Garbanzo Grill is made with a DIY ethic is absurd. And if it's not made in-house, you can be sure it's either locally grown or made. Terry makes a lovely ginger-apple kombucha that has turned many a naysayer onto the fizzy elixir. He ferments batches of sauerkraut and kimchi as side dishes, and all the sauces (special sauce, tahini, BBQ, tzatziki, Mediterranean relish) are made in-house too. Everything is done with a level of perfection that reflects Terry's background working in fine dining restaurants in Colorado, but with a uniquely Eugene kick. Hell, even the rebar chairs out front, stationed alongside the cart with an eating bar, were made "in-house."

"I think part of what he's trying to get across is that each one of his sandwiches is like a composed dish," Navratil said. "And he fusses over every element of it because he wants the first bite to be a revelation to people."

Surprise is a reoccurring theme at the cart. It seems just about every time a wary customer approaches the cart, she leaves learning something new about her culinary affinities. Whiteaker locals have taken note of the food cart's suitability for the Blair neighborhood and how it seems to fit right along with Sam Bond's, The Last Stand and Red Barn.

"John and Jeaninne, they put so much love in their food, and that's really what it takes to hold somebody and get them to enjoy it," Matt Thakkun, a local Whit rat, said. ■



Garbanzo Grill owner Jon Terry has invented the perfect veggie burger

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