



BURGER

The Awesome recreated by Pendleton restaurant for nostalgic diners

REBORN



Kelli and Rodney Bullington have brought back the Pendleton classic — the Awesome Burger — at the Oregon Grain Growers.



Oregon Grain Growers has resurrected the A & R Burger Island's Awesome Burger adding the mega burger to their ever-changing menu.

By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian

Pendleton's Awesome Burger is back, baby. Oregon Grain Growers Brand Distillery rolled out the "2.0" versions of the iconic burger and its Baby Awesome version on April 7 to stomachs hungry for nostalgia. Rodney Bullington, who owns OGG at 511 S.E. Court Ave., Pendleton, with his wife, Kelli, said they served 75 of the burgers that first weekend, almost all of them the bigger size.

It was the first time the burgers were available since the closure of local favorite A & R Burger Island about two decades ago.

Birth of a legend

The A & R stand was around since at least the 1940s when Norm and Joan Burnett bought the Southeast Emigrant Avenue restaurant in 1971. They gave the place an island hut theme and revamped the name. Their son, Jeff Burnett of Pendleton, said the Awesomes were not on the original menu, and it was probably his brother, Gary, who created the artery-clogging scrumptious joy that was the Awesome Burger — a half-pound of ground beef, a slice of ham, strips of Hill Meat bacon, the joint's own "Goody Goop Sauce," all the usual fixings and a side of fries.

If that was too much, you could go with the Baby Awesome and its quarter-pound patty.

The Awesome gripped the pinnacle of Pendleton burgerdom for years, fueling local teen boys and couples. Jeff said he and his wife had their share of the big burgers, but they had to split them in half.

Jeff said Gary and their other brother, Dan, took over ownership in 1986 to 1990, and Gary became Burger Island's last owner.

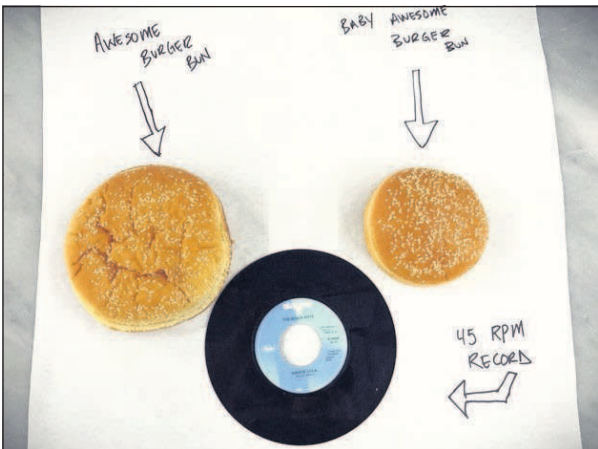
All that burgerly glory came to an end in April 1999. The Oregon Department of Transportation was building a new overpass and needed the land where the restaurant stood. Jeff said the state bought it, and there was some sadness in the land as the restaurant was destroyed.

Back to life

Skip ahead to recent months when Rodney Bullington and his father-in-law, Lonnie Read, were talking about past restaurants in Pendleton and their signature dishes.



Norm and Joan Burnett bought Burger Island in 1971.



The Awesome Burger and Baby Awesome Burger buns compared with a 45 rpm record.

"And one we kept coming back to time and time again was the A & R Burger Island Awesome Burger and Baby Awesome Burger," Rodney said. "We reminisced on past memories of going to A & R Burger Island and how it was a landmark in town for many decades before the new viaduct/overpass was built."

Jeff Burnett entered the picture a few months later

when he entered Oregon Grain Growers to get lunch. Read, an accountant, used to handle the books for Burger Island, Jeff said, and introduced his son-in-law to Pendleton burger royalty. They gushed about the Burnett family legacy, before Jeff said he could get the recipe and share it with Oregon Grain Growers.

"We then decided to add it to the menu, calling it the A&R Burger Island Awesome Burger to pay homage to their family's legacy," said Rodney.

Re-creating the Awesome took about four tries, he said, from the hard-to-find 5-1/2 inch sesame seed buns to the sauce, something akin to Thousand Island dressing. Rodney said his big fear was to serve a burger that did not meet the expectations of local memories.

"It had been about 30 years since I had an Awesome Burger," Rodney said. "We even contacted a past employee (Amador Estrada), who spent two years putting Awesome Burgers together while in high school, for some pointers which was a huge help."

Kelli said Pendleton local Paula Zyph tucked into the first Awesome Burger to come out of OGG's kitchen and gave it a thumbs-up. Rodney said one of the joys is watching people react and reminisce over the burgers.

"We try not to live in the past but respect it," he said.

"We received a lot of great feedback from folks who tried it, and it was just like they remembered, which was a huge relief to us as we were nervous releasing something so dear to many people."

What's on it

The Awesomes are a '50s style of burger, big, juicy, with basics like chopped iceberg lettuce and a pickle. The fanciest part is the bacon and ham. Rodney said he would not let the chef add modern touches, such as baby lettuce.

"We're not free-styling on this recipe," he said.

Oregon Grain Growers is running the burgers for a while to make sure everyone has a chance to try them, but they will not become permanent part of the menu. But Rodney said he sees the burgers as part of the larger picture of Pendleton's food scene.

The small city now offers everything from sushi to pho to steak houses, he said, and is on the way to enticing travelers to pull off the freeway for a good local dish.

"There's kind of a renaissance happening in Pendleton and a lot of culinary choices," he said. "And that's a good thing."