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BLOG

Table Talk

Burger Friday: In a surprise twist, Barnes & Noble kitchen delivers an epic cheeseburger

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The burger: I'll admit that the last place I expected to encounter a memorably delicious cheeseburger was at a bookstore. Turns out — and I apologize in advance for this — you really can't judge a book (or a bookstore) by its cover.

Barnes & Noble has remade its Galleria outpost, relocating the 25-year-old store from the mall's main floor down to the lower level. Although it's roughly 62 times more stylish than its predecessor, it's also noticeably smaller. My book club's December title wasn't in stock (really, Edith Wharton is an inventory no-show?), but the company appears to have different priorities — er, potential revenue streams — in mind other than maintaining a well-stocked fiction and literature section.

Fortunately for burger lovers, that new venture is a restaurant. A good one. It's called **Barnes & Noble Kitchen**, and the Galleria location is its second outlet (a third opens next week in suburban Sacramento, Calif.) for the 600-store chain.

It's also a promising sign for burger fans that executive chef consultant Sheamus Feeley (a Californian with the Branstetter Group, which, along with AvroKO has partnered with B&N to create the restaurant) has definite opinions about burgers.

“This is a casual, approachable restaurant,” he said. “And at the end of the day, I can't think of anything more approachable than a great cheeseburger. Having a craveable burger and some kind of fried potato is soul-satisfying and enriching. It's the litmus test for any new restaurant.”

This next part is a true story. When I arrived, the couple seated two tables down had just received their lunch; both had ordered cheeseburgers. About five minutes later, the hostess led a man to the empty table between us. He sat down, observed what his neighbors were eating and asked, “Are they any good?” The man to his right smiled and said, “This might be the best cheeseburger I've ever had.”

I don't know that I'd go that far — then again, I've probably taste-tested far more burgers than the average Galleria shopper — but it's no exaggeration to say that this burger is a truly exceptional effort. Made even more so by the fact that you're seated 50 feet from stacks of the latest J.K. Rowling juggernaut.

Although the menu labels it a "brisket burger," the thick patty is a brisket/chuck blend.

"I love a pure chuck burger," said Feeley. "But if the animal doesn't have the right intermuscle fat and marbling, it can come out a bit too lean. In a lot of ways, adding in brisket makes it a steak-eater's burger. There's more background, and richness — to bolster the chuck's flavor — without all that white fat."

He's right on the money about the patty's flavor. It radiates a deep, beefy punch.

During his research-and-development phase, Feeley investigated patties in the 4- to 10-ounce range, ultimately landing at six hefty ounces.

"That's the right size, if you execute it right," he said. "You don't have to be wheeled off after you've eaten it."

Back to my lunch. When asked how I wanted my burger prepared, temperature-wise, I answered the question with a question, asking my server how the kitchen prefers to send it out.

"Medium," he said. "Although it really comes closer to medium-rare."

Turns out, his observation was spot-on: the patty's exterior had that deeply caramelized/lightly crusty char, which quickly gave way to a center that was deeply pink, if not edging-toward crimson. The loosely packed ground beef, nicely salty, also remained prodigiously juicy, and mouth-wateringly fragrant.



Condiments are straightforward and effective. There are enough vinegary, slightly sweet pickles layered on top of the bottom bun to flood the patty zone.

“Any burger can be good for a few bites,” said Feeley. “We want the last bite to be as great as the first, which means that we make sure that guests get bites of pickles and other condiments in every single bite.”

Kudos also to the leaves of tender, garden-fresh butter lettuce. The top bun receives a generous swipe of creamy Dijonnaise, and a few snips of raw red onion are definite day brighteners. Another plus: a sharp Cheddar, one that’s aged a few months (“Just enough to put an edge on it,” said Feeley), blankets the top of the patty, and it possesses a just-right melting ability.

As for the bun, it’s a brioche-style beauty.

“Starting with a great bun, that’s the key,” said Feeley. “We take it further, by toasting on the griddle with a bit of butter. You know when you have a great grilled cheese sandwich, and the bread gets slightly crunchy, with that unctuous interior? You get that crispness of the golden brown toast, but you also get that softness. That’s what we’re doing here. The bun gets softened, and it yields to the bite, making it easier to eat.”

Maybe it's because dining in Edina always reminds me to mind my table manners, or perhaps because this bruiser was just too much to handle any other way (I’m opting for the latter; this is a scale issue). Anyway, when my burger arrived, one quick look instinctively led me to reach for a knife and fork.

At that moment, the couple two tables down were leaving, prompting the diner next door to share his farewells, and his gratitude.

“You were right,” he said. “This might be the best burger I’ve ever tasted, too.”

Price: An Edina-appropriate \$16, and so worth it.

Fries: None. Instead, Feeley created what the menu dubs “crispy potatoes,” and their consume-every-morsel powers are downright sinister.

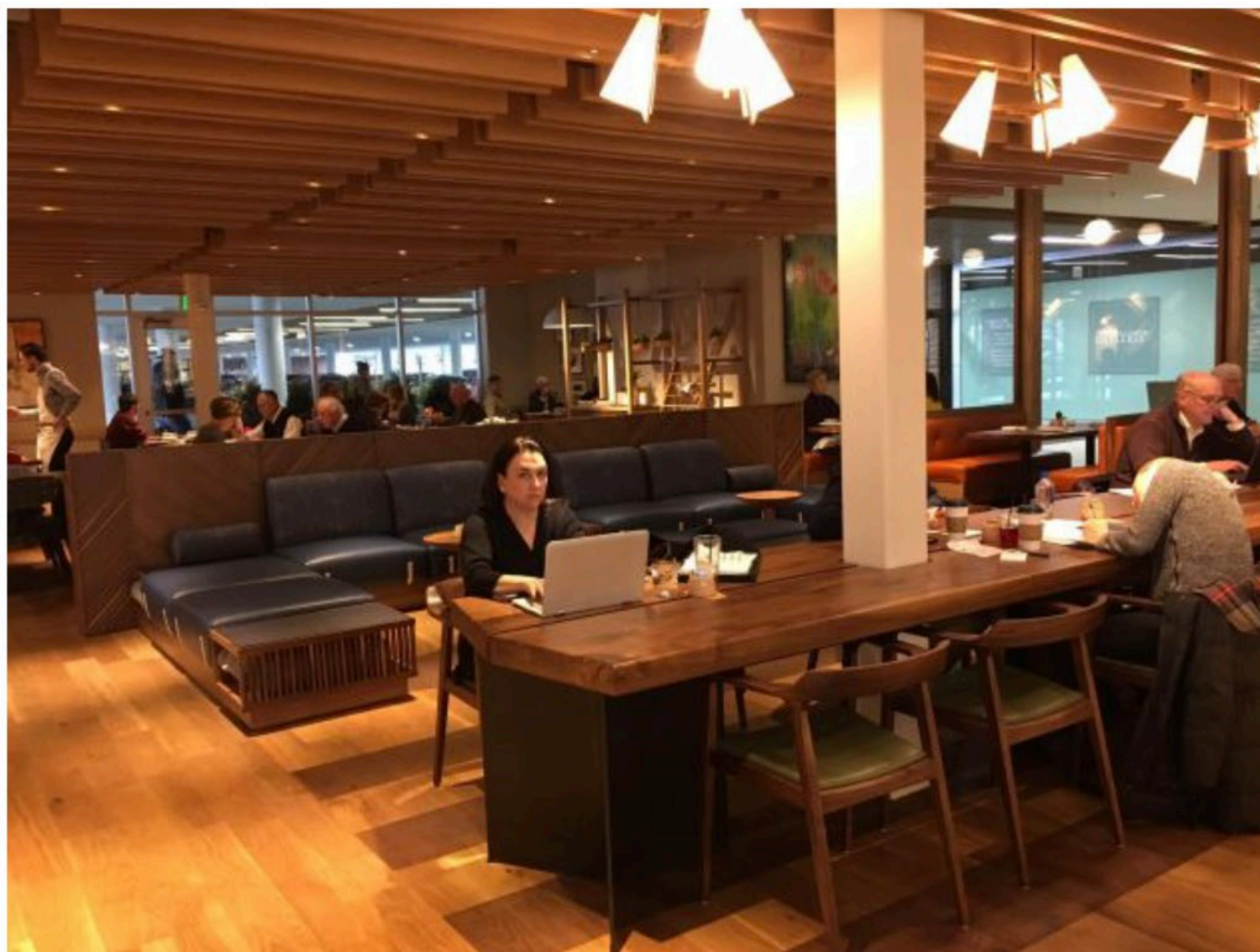
“We wanted to create a potato that would stay hot and crisp,” he said. “I like French fries as much as the next guy, but they’re a science, and you deal with seasonality and sugar and starch fluctuations. They also require a big storage space, and we don’t have that.”

Instead, he managed to achieve a new level of fried spuds nirvana, marrying the ideal baked potato interior with the best French fry exterior. Here’s how: russets are whole-roasted, cooled and then broken up. No slicing.

“They’re lightly broken,” he said. “You need the imperfect imperfections, because those nooks and crannies and crevices create that crisp exterior.”

Before they're served, the potato pieces get a quick finish in the fryer, then they're tossed in extra-virgin olive oil and salt and pepper. A final flourish comes in the form of freshly grated Parmesan. Suddenly, French fries seem passe.

“It’s something that you can do at home,” said Feeley. “I used them for poutine. I love fries, but they get soggy too fast with poutine. This method is great because you can lay down the gravy and the cheese curds and whatever else you like, and the potatoes still stay crisp.”



Other notes: The dining room has a warm, Scandinavian Modern feel, with tons of blonde and tan woods and blue upholstered accents. The mix of seating options is clearly market research-driven and includes a communal table, a small lounge space and a convivial 360-degree bar, all welcoming and comfortable (one touch this print journalist appreciated was the rack of newspapers available, gratis, for diners in search of something to read besides their phones or their recent B&N purchases). A wall of windows

helps wipe away the notion that you're dining in a basement, although the view of parked cars isn't exactly picturesque. Service was warm, gracious and efficient.

The bar pours 22 wines by the glass (including a pair of sparkling choices, ideal for a shopping excursion pick-me-up), with prices averaging \$11. There are six local beers on tap, all priced at \$6. It's a marked improvement over the former store's dreary coffee bar.



Dessert? Of course. Despite the knowledge that one of my all-time-favorite cookies was waiting for me upstairs -- it's the spicy, iced ginger monster at the to-go counter at the [Good Earth](#) -- I opted for the cookie plate (\$7, a deal), and I was not disappointed. There were a half-dozen buttery, still-warm lovelies, served in pairs: chocolate crinkles, oatmeal raisin, chocolate chip. Nice.

Yeah, I'll definitely be back. I can't get a burger when I search for our book club's next title on my Kindle. Well played, Barnes & Noble.