

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

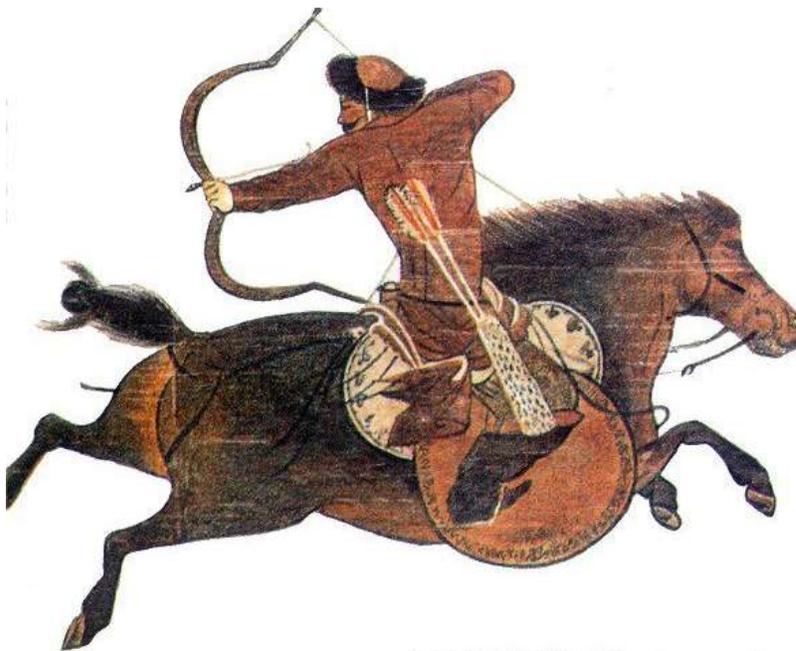
Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Hamburger History

This is a situation where the “fake news” version of the history of the hamburger is far more fascinating than the actual story.

It begins with the widely repeated myth that the ground meat dish known as “steak tartare” (some accounts say it was originally ground horsemeat) had its origins with the Mongol invasion of Europe beginning in the 13th century. The swift, cavalry-based army of fierce Mongol horsemen, known as the “Golden Horde,” galloping out from the steppes of Central Asia, conquered two thirds of the then known world. They remained in their saddles for long periods of time, rarely dismounting, and there was little opportunity to stop and build a fire for a meal.



Mongol Archer on horseback

These strapped-for-time mounted invaders, also known as *Tatars* or *Tartars*, would, in the morning, place a slice of mutton or horsemeat beneath their saddle and retrieve it later, tenderized by the pounding,

to consume raw for dinner. They left this raw-meat-eating cuisine in their wake, and, according to one version of the tale, the recipe was carried by German sailors to Hamburg, where the taste for ground beef begat not only “steak tartare” but also hamburgers. But as with so many good stories, this one just isn’t so.

The Cambridge Medieval History (1924) explained that the apocryphal tale originated when early chroniclers viewed Mongol horsemen putting thin slices of raw meat beneath their saddles, but that the meat was intended to help soothe their horses’ sores rather than serve as part of the men’s diet. The book also noted that the meat would have been impregnated with sweat and inedible by the day’s end. Also, “steak tartare” was not named for the raw-meat-eating *Tatars*, which they were not, but for the tartar sauce that was served along with it.

The name for tartar sauce, which today is more of a condiment for seafood, derives from the French *sauce tartare*, and is indeed named after the *Tatars*. Although it is unlikely that the *Tatars* ever made or consumed such a sauce, the sauce’s actual origin is indeed found in the East, which may have inspired the name – and the added *r* to *tartar*. In Turkey and the Levant, a tahini-based condiment known as *tarator* has traditionally been used as a condiment for fish or seafood.

All of this brings us to the one part of this fanciful story that may be true: the Hamburg, Germany, part.



Hamburg, Germany’s second largest city

Speaking with a gentleman from Hamburg at the recent grand opening of Engel and Völkers (international real estate) New Orleans Historic shop, I was informed that the hamburger did not come from Hamburg. Really? I wasn’t so sure. But we did agree, of course, that the name did. Not the *Homburg*, the hat former New Orleans D.A. Eddie Jordan

wore around town, but the hamburger. The hat was popularized by another Eddie, Edward VII of England, after he visited Bad Homburg in Hesse, Germany, and brought a hat back in this particular style.

Hamburger in German is the demonym of the city of Hamburg, much like *frankfurter* and *wiener*, names for other meat-based foods and demonyms of the cities of Frankfurt, Germany, and Vienna (Wien), Austria, respectively. But how did hamburger become associated with Hamburg?

It seems to have begun in the early eighteenth century with the "Hamburgh steak", popular among Germans, who are claimed to have invented it (or borrowed the method of mincing and chopping it from the Russians). By the mid-18th century, German immigrants also began to arrive in England where Hannah Glasse's popular *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy* included a recipe in 1758 for "Hamburgh sausages", which suggested it be served "roasted with toasted bread". And one of the mixture's suggested ingredients was "rum". By 1805, her cookery book was published in the United States, and before long "Hamburgh steak" became a mainstream dish in nineteenth-century America.

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Appendix to the Art of Cookery.

To make Hamburgh sausages.

• TAKE a pound of beef, mince it very small, with half a pound of the best suet; then mix three quarters of a pound of suet cut in large pieces; then season it with pepper, cloves, nutmeg, a great quantity of garlick cut small, some white wine vinegar, some bay-salt, and common salt, a glass of red wine, and one of rum; mix all this very well together; then take the largest gut you can find, and stuff it very tight; then hang it up a chimney, and smoke it with saw-duft for a week or ten days; hang them in the air, till they are dry, and they will keep a year. They are very good boiled in pease porridge, and roasted with toasted bread under it, or in an amlet.

From The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy

A similar dish to "Hamburg steak" was called "*Rundstück warm*" (bread roll warm), which appeared in Hamburg in 1869 or earlier, and was supposedly consumed by many German emigrants on their way to America. Placed between two slices of bread, the "Hamburgh steak" is reported to have been served on the Hamburg America Line, which began operations in 1847. Direct steamship service existed between New Orleans, Hamburg and Bremen, and may have contributed to

such a transatlantic culinary exchange.

An article in the *Picayune* dated January 4, 1885, describes as “the nearest thing to raw beef to be cooked at all, and yet they are very good.” The paper advised that “the better the beef the better your Hamburg will be – and chop it up very fine ... Season the meat with salt and cayenne to taste, and then mince very finely a small onion together with a little garlic. Mix these well through and then form it into meat cakes about an inch in thickness.”

A later *Picayune* article dated November 27, 1887, instructed “Hamburg Steak” enthusiasts to “Shape the mass into litte steaks an inch in thickness by wetting your hands so the meat will not cling to them. Fry the steaks in hot butter and serve them with or without tomato sauce.”

I just love an account in the *Dallas Morning News* dated October 17, 1925, that reported that the “Hamburger won the decision over Hot Dog at the State Fair.” Reasons for the burger’s win was “more meat in a hamburger. You can see it made and know what is on the inside. It is hot, too, and tender. Besides, they put onion an’ pickle an’ everything on a hamburger, and you get no lagniappe at all with a hot dog.” You may not agree with the article’s entire reasoning, since hot dogs today at Dat Dawg and other New Orleans hot dog purveyors offer a huge array of toppings, but it’s great to hear people in Dallas using our Crescent City word *lagniappe* to highlight the burger’s benefits.

The hamburger sandwich as we know it today, consists of one or more cooked patties of ground beef (usually), placed inside a sliced bread roll or bun (usually), and accompanied by cheese (the cheeseburger), lettuce, tomato, pickles, onions, ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise, relish – the list goes on forever. Other ingredients besides beef may be used, hence the names “veggie burger” and “turkey burger”.

There are quite a number of claimants (too numerous to mention them all) to having been the first to create the hamburger in sandwich form. Fletcher Davis of Athens, Texas, is one contender. He is said to have sold them in 1904 at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis. The family of Oscar Weber Bilby claims that the first-known hamburger to be served on a bun was at Grandpa Oscar’s farm just west of Tulsa, Oklahoma on July 4, 1891. The family conceded that numerous hamburger sandwiches were prepared before between bread slices, but Bilby’s was the first on a bun.



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"Lee's Hamburgers" founder and his 1964 Times-Picayune ad

In New Orleans, right after the turn of the 20th Century, Lee's Hamburgers came into existence. Lester "Lee" Hash, a native of Hot Springs, Arkansas, came to New Orleans in 1901 according to his obituary in the *Times-Picayune*, February 27, 1968 (or as early as 1900) according to a later article in the *Picayune* (September 10, 1984). In any event, the paper reported that at the time he died at age 86, he was the "operator of hamburger shops" in the Crescent City "for 65 years".



Times-Picayune ad, October 10, 1954

"He opened a small stand on Canal St., shortly after arriving, then moved Lee's Hamburgers to a shop across the street from the Roosevelt Hotel where he remained for 16 years."

Comedian and Singer Phil Harris (celebrity King of Bacchus in 1972) "once told radio audiences, broadcasting from Hollywood, how he wished he was in New Orleans to taste a Lee's hamburger." The popularity of Lee's juicy hamburgers packed with onions was noticed by other top notch Blue Room performers, and Lee's fame spread.

LEE'S famous hamburgers has been in existence 65 years. Now located at 3022 Tulane Ave.

Ad in the Times-Picayune, May 20, 1967

Later on, his business moved to half of a shotgun double on Tulane, as well as 2709 Bienville at Broad Street. Today there are several locations, including ones in Metairie, Covington and Slidell.

1952 saw the first Bud's Broiler opened on Airline Highway, the brainchild of Alfred J. "Bud" Saunders, who came to the New Orleans area from Austin Texas. He had been working back in Austin at his uncle's restaurant, Holiday House. Bud's was one of the first local restaurants that required payment upon ordering. Plates were eliminated. Hamburgers cooked over a charcoal grill were served hot in paper envelopes, and Bud had a killer "hickory smoke sauce", still available today.

In 1956, Bud opened his second location at 500 City Park Avenue, still in operation, which is the oldest Bud's still in existence. Bud's continues today in numerous locations, with different owners.



Bud's on City Park Avenue

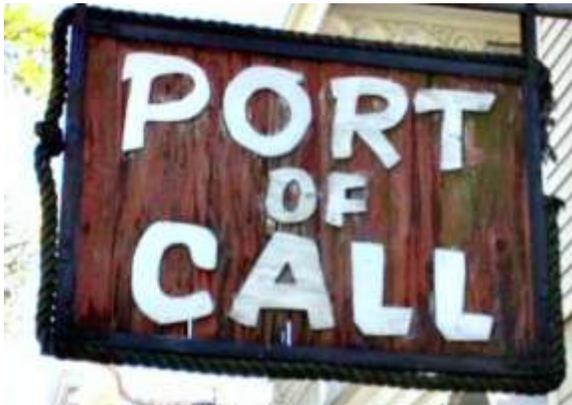
Back in 1988, when the "Zagat New Orleans Restaurant Survey" was being conducted, Bud's Broiler was in the Top 3 of those named by participants. According to the results in the *Times-Picayune* article dated February 7, 1988, Port of Call on Esplanade came in first with 22 votes, just four votes ahead of Ruby Red's and Bud's.

► Port of Call (22) won the hamburger sweepstakes with Ruby Red's and Bud's Broiler (each 18) behind.

Although, New Orleans has a multitude of excellent burger spots, I must mention the Clover Grill at 900 Bourbon. Founded in 1939 and operated for many years by retired policeman Arthur Jacobs, it is open 24 hours and features the amazing "Hub Cap Burger". Yes, they use a real "Hub Cap" to cook your burger thoroughly. Inside are 50s style dining stools, a lively jukebox, an interesting cast of characters at all hours and "Dancing in the aisles only" – not on the tables.



In 1970, Mr. John Hebert, who was “studying design in New York,” won first prize for the best costume on Bourbon St. on Mardi Gras Day.” His jewel-studded “Space Man’s Suit” went up for sale and was displayed at the Clover Grill, of course, “where the Mardi Gras contest reviewing platform is set up each year.” This was according to an article in the *Times-Picayune* dated March 24, 1970.



I’m confident my readers are familiar with Krystal Burgers, founded on October 24, 1932, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and now headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia, the South’s answer to White Castle. The one on Bourbon Street does an amazing business.

The White Castle hamburger chain, founded in 1921 in Wichita, Kansas, covers the Midwestern and Mid-Atlantic United States, and is generally credited as being the very first fast-food chain in the United States. Like Krystal, it is known for its small, square hamburgers often referred to as “sliders”. Priced at only five cents until the 1940s, they remained available for ten cents for many years thereafter.

Today “sliders” are all the rage. In New Orleans, places like The District, with two locations, specializes in these smaller sandwiches – but with diverse appetizing contents.

But when it comes to miniature hamburgers, do you remember Royal Castle? It was a Miami, Florida-based chain founded in 1938 by

William Singer, also known for its Birch Beer beverage, a version of root beer. In 1963 there were 15 locations in the New Orleans area, but none remain today.

NEW ORLEANS ROYAL CASTLE FANS:

Here in New Orleans, we have 15 Royal Castles... over 110 friendly, courteous countermen and women, ready to serve you Quick as a Smile, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Next time you're hungry and in a hurry... stop! at your nearby Royal Castle.



If Root Beer was something you wanted to wash down your burger, another alternative was Frostop. The first Frostop root beer stand in the nation was opened in 1926 in Springfield, Ohio, by L. S. Harvey. After a chain of franchise locations was established, Thurman W. Ganus opened the South's first Frostop Drive-In in New Orleans during the Fall of 1954 under the iconic "revolving stein". Ganus was the brother of Clifton L. Ganus, the "G" in A&G Cafeterias.

The "Lot-O-Burger" was Frostop's special hamburger offering, still available after more than half a century. Some of the Frostops in the New Orleans area have been restored to their 50s glory years. The "Ted's" in the signage refers to Ted Sternberg, a jet pilot in the Korean conflict, who became a multiple franchise owner. Many "nostalgic" car owners meet at the Frostop to show off their custom classic cars, a technicolor feast for the eyes.



Classic Cars on display at the Frostop

Then there was the Toddle House chain of diners. Perhaps you recall the one at Metairie Road and Labarre. Breakfast was available all day (24 hours), and the cheeseburger was touted on the menu as the "world's best hamburger". The chain was founded in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1932 by James Frederick Smith, father of FedEx founder Fred Smith.

There were other national chains to arrive in New Orleans, such as McDonald's with its "Big Mac" and Burger King with its "Whopper". There were also Checkers and Rally's (now merged). James and William "Billy" Trotter started the first Burger King in the metro area in 1963 on Airline Highway. "Billy" Trotter eventually became co-chairman of Chart House, Inc., Burger King's largest franchise holders.

There are many other hamburger havens, past and present, among the many restaurants in New Orleans - perhaps your very favorite. I cannot cover them all at this time - perhaps at a later date. From Camellia Grill and Bull's Corner to Company Burger and Tru Burger, from Ground Pat'i, Russell's Marina Grill and Lakeview Harbor to O'Henry's, SmashBurger, Juicy Lucy's, Bayou Beer Garden and GB's Patio Bar & Grill; for those I have omitted, *mea culpa*, and tomorrow is another day.



And as J. Wellington Wimpy, who joined the Popeye cartoon strip in 1931, often said: "I'd gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger to-day."

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"Hamburger History"
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