

## PERFECT BURGERS!

In recent years burgers have moved up from just being fast food faire to ultra-chic and hip with top chefs creating all kinds of exotically flavored and constructed burgers including using outrageously expensive Kobe or Wagyu beef, stuffing them with foie gras, wild mushrooms, truffles, the meat from braised short ribs or beef cheeks and more. I confess I'm one who likes mine in a simpler vein.

First, we should probably define what a Burger or Hamburger is and where they came from. I'll begin with a little history. According to Alan Davidson in his wonderful encyclopedic book *The Oxford Companion to Food* (Oxford University Press 1999), the word "hamburger" has a relatively short history and first showed up in print around 1890. Cooked, flavored patties of meat however date a long way back and appear in many cuisines. It's thought that the port of Hamburg in Germany and its *Hamburg Steak*, enjoyed by sailors there who introduced it to others in their travels, is probably the birthplace for burgers as we know them today. Their fate was sealed when "*hamburgers*" served in a bun were introduced at the St. Louis World Fair of 1904 and the rest is history as they say!

Burger purists will insist that burgers are only made from beef and that any other base ingredient puts it in a different category. I tend to agree with this but like so many culinary traditions "burgers" have evolved and now appear on menus made from fishes, birds and even vegetables. So in the spirit of ecumenism I'll begin with what I think makes the best, juiciest and tastiest classic beef burger and then include recipes for my favorite fish, veggie and bird burgers.



## **6 Secrets for a Great Grilled Beef Burger**

1. The right meat and fat content is critical. I prefer ground sirloin or chuck with 15 – 20 % fat. The old axiom “fat is flavor” really applies here and fat is also what keeps the meat juicy. More fat however doesn’t necessarily make it better. For this article I tried burgers made with 25 and 30% fat and though delicious and juicy at the end they left a greasy mouth feel. Ideally meat should be freshly ground and if you have a store with a kind butcher ask him or her to do that for you. Alternately you can grind your own (see note below).
2. Mix in whatever seasonings you are using very gently. Like pie dough, the more you handle the meat the tougher your burger. Loosely mix to incorporate seasonings and the gently but firmly form the patties. Wetting your hands will help too to prevent them from getting sticky and helps the meat to come together faster.
3. Make patties a little thinner in the center. I shoot for something like 1 inch on the edges and about 3/4 inch on the edges. As the meat shrinks during cooking they’ll even out and the meat also will cook more evenly.
4. Keep the patties cold until you are ready to grill them. This keeps the fat firm and helps it stay in the meat adding flavor and juice which is what we are aiming for.
5. Cook on relatively high heat. Obviously make sure your grill is hot, clean and well-oiled to prevent the burgers from sticking. Remember too that the hood is your friend. Open the vents so that the fire stays hot but put the lid on while cooking. This provides an even heat and takes advantage of the convection of the heat rising and circulating around the meat. *Note: I’m in favor of grilling as opposed to cooking beef burgers in a pan. If you don’t want to fire up your grill however a ridged grill pan on your stove top is an acceptable alternative.*
6. Turn the burgers just once. Resist the temptation to constantly turn them. The more you turn the more you are likely to toughen and dry out the meat. Also if you turn too soon the burgers are more likely to stick to the grill. Also never press on the burgers while they are cooking. The juices you squeeze out are where much of the flavor and moisture is.

### **MASTER RECIPE**

Serves 4

1-1/2 pounds freshly ground sirloin or chuck with 15 – 20% fat  
1 teaspoon Kosher or sea salt

1/2 teaspoon freshly ground pepper  
2 teaspoons Worcestershire

Gently break the meat into large pieces, add seasonings and toss to incorporate salt pepper and worcestershire. Being careful not to over handle and using wet hands, divide the meat into 4 equal portions and form patties about 1 inch thick at the edges and a little less in the center. Chill for at least 20 minutes before grilling. Grill over a hot fire, turning once. For rare cook approximately 2 minutes per side, 3 minutes for medium rare and 4 minutes for medium. (Hopefully no one will ever want a good burger cooked well done!).

Serve on a bun with the traditional garnishes. If you don't want to put the burger on a bun and would rather serve it alone, topping with the following red wine pan sauce is a delicious alternative.

#### Red Wine Pan Sauce for Burgers

Makes about 1/2 cup or enough for 4 servings

4 tablespoons butter  
1/4 cup finely chopped shallots or green onions  
1 cup beef broth or chicken stock  
3/4 cup red wine  
1 tablespoon Balsamic vinegar  
2 teaspoons Dijon mustard, preferably grainy type  
Salt and freshly ground pepper

Heat 1 tablespoon butter in a sauté pan over moderate heat and sauté the shallots until softened but not brown, about 2 minutes. Add the broth, wine, vinegar and mustard and bring to a boil over high heat stirring regularly. Continue to cook until reduced by 60% or so and lightly thickened, about 5 minutes. Off heat whisk in remaining butter and season to your taste with salt and pepper. Serve warm.

### **3 Variations on the Classic**

**Mushroom:** Finely chop 8 ounces of cleaned cremini mushrooms. Heat 2 tablespoons butter or olive oil in a sauté pan over moderately high heat and sauté the mushrooms until nicely browned and all liquid has evaporated, about 6 minutes. Cool and chill in refrigerator for at least 20 minutes. Add to meat with other seasonings and gently toss to combine and shape.

**Blue Cheese:** Follow Master recipe and form the meat into 8 patties instead of 4. Divide 8 - 10 ounces creamy blue cheese such as Point Reyes Farmstead Blue or Gorgonzola

into 4 equal portions and form into discs. Place cheese on 4 of the patties and then top with remaining 4 patties and gently but firmly seal the edges of the patties around the cheese.

**Green Chile and Jack Cheese:** Char 2 medium fresh poblano chiles on a gas burner, a grill, under a broiler or with a propane torch. Place in a bowl and cover with plastic wrap for a few minutes. Scrape off blackened skins and discard stems and seeds. Finely dice and set aside. Alternately use 1/2 cup canned green chiles, well drained and patted dry with paper towels. Add 3/4 cup grated flavored jack cheese of your choice (garlic, pepper, herb, etc.) along with chiles with other seasonings and gently toss to combine and shape.

### **Grinding Your Own Meat**

Grinding your own meat at home is a great way to go. You'll find both manual grinders and grinder attachments for standing mixers at good cookware stores or on-line and they aren't all that expensive. It's really a very simple process. For the 1-1/2 pounds of ground meat called for in the master recipe buy 1-1/2 pounds of chuck or sirloin roast and keep the fat layer on it. Cut the meat into 1 inch or so cubes, toss with 2 teaspoons of salt, cover and refrigerate for at least 4 hours.

Chill your grinder too before using. A chilled grinder is more efficient and also helps insure that the fat stays firm. Following the manufacturer's directions grind the meat in small batches remembering to keep everything as cold as you can.

## **FRESH TUNA BURGER**

Serves 4

A question you might ask is "why in the world would anyone chop up good first quality fresh tuna to make a burger?" My answer is that you can have something with more delicious flavor than a tuna steak with very little effort. The key of course is to handle the fish carefully and don't over season over manipulate or overcook. You can either grill these burgers (I'd suggest using a hinged grill rack) or pan sauté them. I prefer the latter since I have a little better heat control and I like to serve mine at least medium rare. I prefer to chop the tuna by hand rather than using a food processor which can quickly turn the fish to a puree which is definitely not what we want here. It can be done however. Just make sure you have a very sharp (read new or nearly so) metal blade in

your processor to do the chopping. Have you ever replaced that blade by the way??  
Might be time to think about it if you want to use your processor for this recipe!

1 pound fresh sushi grade tuna  
1/2 teaspoon Kosher or sea salt or to taste  
1/8 teaspoon freshly ground pepper or to taste  
1/2 teaspoon finely chopped or grated peeled fresh ginger  
2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro  
2 tablespoons finely chopped red or green onion  
2 tablespoons Canola or other neutral oil for sautéing

With a sharp knife chop the tuna into roughly 1/4 inch dice. Gently stir in salt, pepper, ginger, cilantro and onion being careful not to over mix. Divide mixture into four and gently press into patties about 1 inch thick. Chill in the refrigerator for at least 20 minutes before cooking.

Heat the oil in a sauté pan over medium heat and cook the burgers until nicely browned on both sides, about 4 minutes total for a medium rare burger. Serve on a bun with traditional garnishes or by itself topped with your favorite sauce or a tablespoon or so of the following spicy Thai inspired sauce:

#### Spicy South East Asian Sauce

Makes about 1 cup

1/2 cup fresh lime juice  
4 tablespoons Asian fish sauce  
1 teaspoon minced fresh red chile or to taste  
2 teaspoons finely minced garlic  
1 tablespoon rice vinegar  
5 tablespoons sugar or to taste  
1 tablespoon cilantro leaves, coarsely chopped

Combine all ingredients and stir until sugar is dissolved. Let stand at least 30 minutes before serving for flavors to develop. Adjust salt/sweet/tart/hot flavors to your taste.

## **SALMON BURGERS WITH GREEN GODDESS DRESSING**

Serves 4

In my restaurant days when we were filleting fresh salmon we always seemed to have a few small pieces left over. This recipe takes advantage of those little tidbits. Serve with a dollop of the Green Goddess dressing, on a nice soft bun with spicy arugula. Alternately serve on top of a lightly dressed salad of spicy greens. You'll note that I call

for the salmon to be both diced and finely chopped. This gives a nice texture to the finished burger.

8 ounces fresh salmon, cut into 1/4-inch dice  
8 ounces fresh salmon, very finely chopped  
4 ounces fresh uncooked shrimp, cut into 1/4-inch dice  
2 egg whites, beaten  
1/4 cup finely diced red bell pepper, blanched quickly and drained  
2 tablespoons finely chopped green onions  
1-1/2 tablespoons finely grated lemon zest (use a microplane)  
1 teaspoon seeded and minced jalapeno chile (or to taste)  
1 tablespoon or so mayonnaise  
Kosher or sea salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste  
1/2 cup or so Panko or other coarse dry breadcrumbs, plus more for dredging  
Olive oil for sautéing  
Green Goddess dressing(recipe follows)

In a medium bowl, combine all the ingredients for the salmon mixture. It should just hold together and not be too dense and heavy. Add more breadcrumbs or mayonnaise if needed. Divide the mixture and pat to form into 4 cakes no thicker than 1 inch. (The salmon cakes may be prepared in advance to this point. Store uncovered in the refrigerator for up to 4 hours.)

Dredge the salmon cakes in remaining breadcrumbs that you've seasoned with salt and pepper. In a large sauté pan over moderate heat add oil to just cover the bottom. Sauté the cakes until golden brown, about 3 minutes per side. Serve immediately with a dollop of the Green Goddess dressing.

### Green Goddess Dressing

Makes a generous cup

3/4 cup mayonnaise  
1/4 cup sour cream or crème fraîche  
4 (or more) anchovy fillets packed in oil, drained and chopped  
3 tablespoons chopped chives  
2 tablespoons chopped parsley  
1 tablespoon drained chopped capers  
2 teaspoons finely grated lemon zest  
Sea salt and freshly ground pepper  
Drops of fresh lemon juice

Combine all ingredients except salt, pepper and lemon juice in a food processor and pulse a few times to combine. Season to your taste with salt, pepper and lemon juice. Store covered and refrigerated for up to 3 days.



## **BLACK BEAN VEGGIE BURGER**

Serves 4

The repeated chorus with all burgers is to not over work them when putting them together to make sure that they have some texture and moisture left in them after cooking. This is also important with vegetable based burgers. You can grill or sauté these but I prefer the latter because they are more delicate and have a bit of a tendency to fall apart since they don't have the raw protein that meats and fishes have to hold everything together. If you decide to grill them I recommend a hinged grill rack, which makes it easy to turn them. This recipe has a bit of a Mexican twist to it.

3 tablespoons olive oil

1/2 cup chopped green onions, including both white and green parts

1 small seeded and stemmed poblano pepper, finely chopped (about 1/2 cup)

2 large cloves garlic, finely chopped

1 15 oz. can cooked black beans, drained and rinsed

1/2 cup roughly chopped and loosely packed cilantro leaves

1 large egg, lightly beaten

1/2 cup toasted whole grain bread crumbs, made from 2 slices or so of bread

1/2 teaspoon pure chile powder such as Ancho or Chimayo

1/4 teaspoon ground cumin

1/2 teaspoon salt or to taste

Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a small sauté pan over moderate heat and add the onions, pepper and garlic and sauté for a minute or two to just soften a little and remove the raw taste. Remove from heat and place in the bowl of a food processor along with the beans. Pulse 2 or 3 times to roughly chop the beans. Be very careful not to over process.

Place mixture in a bowl and gently stir in rest of ingredients. Divide the mixture into 4 portions and form into patties. Chill uncovered for at least 30 minutes in the refrigerator. Add remaining 2 tablespoons oil to a sauté pan and over medium heat cook the burgers until nicely browned on both sides, about 5 minutes.

Serve on a bun with traditional garnishes or, to complete the Mexican theme, top with some of the following salsa:

#### Tomatillo and Avocado Salsa

Makes about 3/4 cup

1 medium fresh tomatillo, husk removed, washed and coarsely chopped  
1/2 teaspoon chopped garlic  
1/2 teaspoon seeded and chopped fresh serrano chile, or to taste  
1 tablespoon chopped green onion  
1 large ripe avocados, peeled and pitted  
Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

In a food processor add the tomatillos, garlic, chile and scallions and pulse to finely chop. Coarsely chop the avocado, add to the processor and pulse until just blended. Salsa should still have some texture. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Store covered and refrigerated for up to 2 days.

## **TURKEY BURGERS**

Serves 4

For both flavor and moisture be sure to use dark meat turkey from the legs and thighs. I prefer to chop my own, but you can generally buy ground dark turkey in the market which works fine. This recipe has a North African flavor to it. You can either pan roast like the tuna burger above or grill. I prefer the latter for these burgers.

1-1/2 pounds boneless, skinless turkey legs and/or thighs  
2 cloves peeled garlic  
1 teaspoon salt  
1/4 cup each chopped and lightly packed fresh mint and parsley

1-1/2 teaspoons ground cumin  
2 teaspoons paprika (regular or smoked)  
1/2 teaspoon ground allspice  
1/4 teaspoon cayenne or to taste

With a sharp knife chop the turkey into roughly 1/4 inch dice and set aside in a bowl. Mince the garlic and mash to a paste with the salt using the side of a heavy cooks knife. Gently stir garlic and remaining ingredients into the turkey being careful not to over mix. Divide mixture into four and gently press into patties about 1 inch thick. Chill in the refrigerator for at least 20 minutes before cooking.

Prepare the grill for direct heat cooking over medium-hot charcoal (medium heat for gas). Be sure to lightly oil the clean grill rack then grill the patties, covered with all vents open, turning once for approximately 8 minutes total or until completely cooked through.

Serve with traditional garnishes or top with a dollop of the following cucumber sauce:

#### Cucumber and Yogurt Sauce

Makes about 3/4 cup

1/2 cup peeled, seeded and finely diced cucumber, preferably English (unwaxed)  
3 tablespoons finely chopped red onion  
2 teaspoons salt  
1/2 cup thick, Greek-style yogurt  
2 tablespoons finely chopped cilantro  
Pinch of sugar  
Big pinch cayenne or Aleppo pepper

Combine cucumber and onion in a bowl and sprinkle with salt. Allow to sit at room temperature for 20 minutes at least. Drain off liquid and rinse to remove excess salt. Taste and rinse again if necessary. Add yogurt, cilantro, sugar and pepper and stir gently to combine. Allow to sit for 30 minutes for flavors to develop. Adjust seasoning to your own taste. Can be made ahead and stored refrigerated and covered for up to a day.

### **SOFT SQUISHY BURGER BUNS**

Makes 12

You can also form into 14 to 16 portions if you want to make buns for sliders.

2 tablespoons granulated sugar

1 cup lukewarm water  
1 packet active dry yeast  
1-1/4 teaspoons salt  
1 large egg, lightly beaten  
3-1/2 cups unbleached all-purpose flour  
2 tablespoons (1 oz.) cold butter cut into 1/4-inch pieces  
Drops of olive oil  
3 tablespoons butter, melted (1 1/2 oz), plus more for the baking sheet

Using a stand mixer with the paddle add the sugar to the water and stir to dissolve. Sprinkle yeast over and allow to sit for 5 minutes or so or until mixture becomes frothy. Add salt, egg, flour and cold butter. Mix and knead all the dough ingredients except for the melted butter until a soft, smooth dough forms. (*I've suggested a stand mixer here, but you could also do it by hand or with a bread machine*). Add a few drops of olive oil and turn the dough in the mixing bowl. Cover the dough with plastic and let it rise for 1 to 2 hours or until it's doubled in bulk.

Gently deflate the dough and divide it into 12 pieces. Shape each piece into a round ball, then flatten it to a squat round blob about 3 inches across. (Another easy way to shape buns, besides rolling them into balls and flattening, is to gently deflate the dough and form it into a smooth 8-inch log. Using a serrated knife, slice the log into 8 pieces. Gently tuck the edges of each piece underneath the ball of dough to form a squat ball. Place the buns on a lightly buttered or parchment-lined baking sheet, cover, and let rise for about an hour or until noticeably puffy.

Preheat the oven to 375°F (190°C).

Brush the buns with about half the melted butter and bake until golden, 14 to 18 minutes. As soon as you remove the buns from the oven, brush them with the remaining melted butter, which will lend the buns a satiny, buttery crust. Place the buns on a wire rack to cool completely. Store in a closed large plastic bag for up to 3 days.



John Ash © 2019