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CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE

This Sept. 26 Food article incorrectly said the hamburger bun at Palena was derived from a Parker House roll recipe by pastry chef Ann Amernick. The bun recipe was developed by chef Frank Ruta, based on a recipe from former White House sous chef Hans Raffert.

Seeking Bliss on a Bun

By Jane Black
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The hamburger at EatBar in [Arlington](#) is the kind of burger you wish you could make at home. It's got just the right touch of char but remains run-down-your-hands juicy with a deep, beefy flavor. But the fact is, you probably can't make it yourself. Or let's just say you wouldn't. Chef Nathan Anda's secret: Mix butter into the meat.

The simplest foods are the hardest to make well, and the humble burger is no exception. That's why many of Washington's top chefs take their burgers very seriously.

Some use meat graded [USDA](#) prime, the [Russell Crowe](#) of the beef world. Others use only dry-aged meat, ensuring your burger the same respect as a \$40-a-plate sirloin. Many -- you could call them control freaks -- insist on grinding the meat themselves.

Chefs' culinary ambitions don't stop with the beef. At Charlie Palmer Steak on [Capitol Hill](#) and [Cleveland Park](#)'s Palena, the chefs make the buns from scratch daily. At Central Michel Richard, chef Cedric Maupiller slow-cooks each tomato slice in olive oil, sugar, salt, pepper and rosemary. And almost every high-end joint hand-cuts its fries and deep-fries them -- twice. (After all, what's a great burger without fries to match?)

Their efforts have paid off. Palena chef Frank Ruta says his 30-seat cafe serves up as many as 60 burgers a night, accounting for anywhere from one-third to a half of the restaurant's total orders. "We get people who split a burger for a first course, then get chicken and a salad," he said. "They have to have it."

Which one should you have? To find out, we ordered burgers from 13 upscale Washington area restaurants, testing for juiciness, beefy flavor, char and the all-important bun-to-burger ratio. Even with prices reaching as high as \$18, not all made the grade. We gave extra points for thoughtful toppings such as house-made ketchup and pickles and ripe tomatoes. (An unripe tomato has no place in a good restaurant, even atop a hamburger.) And we subtracted points when the kitchen failed to cook the burger to our desired medium-rare; only half passed that basic test.

The best -- and the worst -- surprised us. Here's the beef:

OUR FAVORITES

Central Michel Richard

Advertisement



\$16 (plus \$1 for cheese, \$1 for bacon)

Lunch and dinner

1001 Pennsylvania Ave. NW

202-626-0015

<http://www.centalmichelrichard.com>

Score: 5 (out of 5)

Central's chef tested at least 10 kinds of beef before he settled on dry-aged Black Angus from a small farm near [Baltimore](#) for the restaurant's burger. The same attention to detail went into every other component: the perfectly sized bun, the velvety confit tomato and the paper-thin crispy potato disks that add glorious contrast to the juicy meat. Thankfully, though, this burger doesn't taste as fussy as it is. The kitchen's technique melts magically into the background, and all you taste is the hamburger of your dreams: juicy, beefy, utterly indulgent. Is \$16 too much for a hamburger? What's the price of heaven?

Palena

\$10 (plus \$10 for fry plate)

Dinner only

3529 Connecticut Ave. NW

202-537-9250

<http://www.palenarestaurant.com>

Score: 5

We considered the fact that some people order the burger at Palena only as an excuse to get the fry plate, a heavenly assortment of french fries, onion rings, dauphine potatoes and marinated lemon rings. But once you've tasted the seven-ounce burger, it becomes an obsession. Perhaps it's the occasional trimming of Kobe beef that goes into the hand-ground mix or the garlic-scented mayonnaise that's smeared on the house-made bun, derived from pastry chef [Ann Amernick](#)'s old recipe for Parker rolls. More than likely, though, it's the cheese, a northern Italian variety with a hint of truffle that makes it so mysteriously good. For \$10, it almost doesn't matter. It's the best value in town.

EXCELLENT

EatBar

\$10 (plus \$4 for fries)

Brunch and dinner

2761 Washington Blvd., Arlington

703-778-5051

<http://www.tallularerestaurant.com>

Score: 4

We've nicknamed EatBar's the Goldilocks burger: Not too highbrow. Not too lowbrow. Just right. Chef Anda takes eight ounces of lower-fat, all-natural beef, then mixes it with butter, shallots, garlic, rosemary, salt and pepper before sauteing it to a perfect medium-rare. It's served with the usuals, plus thin homemade bread-and-butter pickles on a toasted brioche bun. The result: flavor that pops and enough juice to form happy puddles on the plate. Thin-cut fries tossed with salt, pepper and rosemary come separately but are worth the extra splurge.

BLT Steak

\$16

Lunch only

1625 I St. NW

202-689-8999

<http://www.blsteak.com>

Score: 4

It takes discipline to order a burger at BLT as everyone around you carves into their prime sirloin. But you won't be sorry once it arrives. The eight-ounce burger gets just as much attention as the higher-priced items. The meat is perfectly seasoned with salt and pepper and grilled until it's just rosy at the center; the old-school sesame bun -- toasted and buttered for a little modern flair -- stood up well to the juicy beef and equally juicy tomato. This burger could happily stand alone, but the elegant cone of crisp, thin-cut fries dusted with parsley and the small tub of creamy coleslaw are welcome accompaniments.

Charlie Palmer Steak

\$13 (plus \$5 for fries)

Lunch only; dinner upon request

101 Constitution Ave. NW

202-547-8100

<http://www.charliepalmer.com>

Score: 4

It's risky to be too fancy with a steakhouse crowd. But Charlie Palmer's burger expertly walks the line between manly beef and haute cuisine. The 10-ounce disk is picture-perfect, served with a farm-fresh

tomato, lettuce and balsamic onions and topped with a buttered, toasted poppy-seed bun that's made in-house each morning. On the side: five kinds of mustard, including lemon and tarragon. It tastes as good as it looks; the meat is flecked with parsley and chives, then grilled, and the oversize cone of herby fries, served with a lovely chipotle garlic aioli, is big enough for three greedy snackers to share. The only flaw? Our burger arrived slightly overdone.

VERY GOOD

Morton's

\$14

Lunch only

1050 Connecticut Ave. NW (and other locations)

202-955-5997

<http://www.mortons.com>

Score: 3.5

This is as close to a steak as a burger can come. The whopping 15-ounce hunk of prime beef is seasoned with a little salt, pepper and Morton's secret ingredient: a drizzle of tomato juice. The result is an old-school beefy flavor that serious carnivores will crave -- even if it arrives, as it did when we visited, very rare, which made it taste more like steak tartare than a burger. Sadly, the supermarket-style roll and the toppings didn't live up to the beef's promise; the tomato was only passable, and the fries lacked crispness. Still, if the kitchen manages to cook it right, traditionalists won't find a burger they like better.

Black's Bar and Kitchen

\$11 (plus \$1 for cheese, \$2 for bacon)

Lunch, dinner, brunch

7750 Woodmont Ave., [Bethesda](#)

301-652-5525

<http://www.blacksbarandkitchen.com>

Score: 3.5

Point totals inch upward when the eight-ounce disk of grilled ground beef arrives, thick, crusty and right where medium-rare should be; points are subtracted for aesthetics, since it hovers well beyond the perimeter of its so-so sesame-seed potato roll. First bite: A drop of juice hits the napkin (yesss!), and it's seasoned but not too salty, a texture that's chewy but not overworked. The iceberg lettuce is shredded (a shame); the crescents of macerated onion provide color and crunch (double nod). The fries seal the deal: as thin as the 99-cent variety, but firm and crisp, plentiful and habit-forming.

RESPECTABLE

[Sonoma Restaurant and Wine Bar](#)

\$13 (plus \$1.50 for fontina, goat cheese, gorgonzola or scamorza cheese, plus \$2 for pancetta or wild mushrooms)

Lunch and dinner

223 Pennsylvania Ave. SE

202-544-8088

<http://www.sonomadc.com>

Score: 3

Warning: There are no fries at Sonoma. This is a wine bar with a small kitchen, and the chef had to choose between a wood-fired grill and a fryer. It wasn't a bad choice (though on the scale of food heresy, burgers without fries rates pretty high). The fruitwood gives Sonoma's eight ounces of dry-aged Angus a lovely smokiness, though a little salt would have gone a long way to help bring out the natural flavors, too. So would a little less heat; our burger, though juicy, arrived solidly medium. Still, the accompaniments shine: The tomato, from organic co-op Tuscarora, was a taste of high summer, and the grilled onions added just the right bite. It all goes down very nicely with a glass of cabernet. You might not even miss the fries after all.

Ardeo

\$12

Dinner and Sunday brunch

3311 Connecticut Ave. NW

202-244-6750

<http://www.ardeorestaurant.com>

Score: 3

There's nothing wrong with a creative burger. Bacon, avocado, sauteed onions, cheese and chipotle are all respectable add-ons. But restraint is important. That's the flaw with Ardeo's burger. Each of the five toppings is delicious: the bacon sublimely smoky, the avocado silky and smooth, the chipotle pungent. But the burger, which when tasted separately was meaty and well cooked, disappeared in the riot of flavors. The fries, in contrast, were simplicity perfected: hand-cut potatoes, with some of the skin left on and a salty kick that made us yearn for more.

DC Coast

\$13

Lunch only

1401 K Street NW

202-216-5988

<http://www.dccoast.com>

Score: 3

This seven-ounce burger has all the hallmarks of cheffy touches: shiny, eggy, soft bun; sharp cheddar; cured tomatoes; and housemade steak sauce on the side. And the effect generally pleases, with a grilled flavor to the meat and above-average fries. It doesn't add up to anything exquisite, though, mostly because the cheese, bun and sauce (which tastes like a particularly fresh and zesty Heinz 57) overwhelm the poor burger, which needs to be half again as thick to even think about competing.

The Capital Grille

\$13

Lunch only

601 Pennsylvania Ave. NW (also in [Tysons Corner](#))

202-737-6200

<http://www.thecapitalgrille.com>

Score: 3

This is a super-juicy burger, the kind that had us wishing for a barside sink or at least a finger bowl. The 10-ounce hunk of meat tastes deliciously like what it is: chopped sirloin. If only the thick, meaty-tasting patty weren't compromised by a yawner of a bun (do onion rolls ever taste fresh?) that had been positively blackened on a grill and by the mismatch of havarti cheese, which melts (or doesn't) in all the wrong ways. To add insult to injury, fries didn't accompany the burger on the plate; salt-free potato chips arrived instead.

FORGETTABLE

Vermilion

\$10

Lunch only

1120 King St., Alexandria

703-684-9669

<http://www.vermilionrestaurant.com>

Score: 2

Somebody's got a [Wendy's](#) fixation; Vermilion's burger was the only one we sampled that came in a rectangular shape. Unlike Wendy's, this seven-ouncer may have been hot, but it sure wasn't juicy, even though, as at EatBar (its sister restaurant), Vermilion's chef mixes butter into the beef. One technique was ruined by another, because the beef was overcooked. That left as the best part of the setup the additions: crunchy red cabbage slaw and pickled jalapenos.

Les Halles

\$12.50 (lunch), \$13.50 (dinner)

Lunch and dinner

1201 Pennsylvania Ave. NW

202-347-6848

<http://www.leshalles.net>

Score: 1

Maybe it's because Les Halles bills itself as a French brasserie that it just doesn't care whether its take on a quintessentially American dish shines. We ordered our 10-ounce patty medium-rare, and it arrived practically petrified, dwarfed by an oversize brioche bun. If the meat had any flavor (the chef says it's "prime Angus"), it had leached out by the time it reached our table. And the mealy tomato that accompanied it, along with grilled onions, lettuce and slightly under-salted fries, didn't make us feel any more forgiving. Indeed, the only memorable thing about this burger was the deliciously fresh, lightly dressed side salad.

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