Earlier this year, at the Gordon Food Service® spring food show, I was preparing to talk about The Next Phase of the Burger Boom, when a curious chef approached and asked, “What can you possibly have left to talk about?”

Quite a bit, as it turns out. America is a burger-loving nation. We eat more burgers every year—clearly, we can’t get enough of them. And, while the foundation of quick-service restaurants may have been built on burgers, full-service establishments are now driving innovation.

Luxurious burgers with custom-grind beef blends, unique condiments, and deluxe toppings have become the cornerstone of menus across the country. In many casual taverns and gastropubs, signature burgers account for 35 to 50 percent of total food sales. A signature burger that stands out from the crowd and is different from other restaurants’ offerings is a guaranteed sales draw.

**NOT THE SAME OLD GRIND**

Burger evolution has reached a point where almost every topping, sauce, and bun combination has been tried, so now the focus is on the quality of the meat. Specialty meat grinds—specifically grass-fed beef and custom-grind, premium beef—are probably the best example of this most recent innovation.

Lately, 100-percent grass-fed beef (which is also usually hormone- and antibiotic-free) has gotten a lot of press, mostly because of the perception that it’s healthier and more eco-friendly. Certainly, grass-fed beef makes a fine burger and, as a premium product, is appealing to customers. Unfortunately, this leaner beef lacks much of the internal marbling and intensity of flavor found in top-quality corn-
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finished beef. Punch up the flavor of grass-fed beef with robust toppings to help compensate for its milder taste.

At The Burger Point in Chicago, for example, grass-fed beef burgers are the primary menu offering. Its signature “Burger Point Burger” is a flavorful combination of pepper-Jack cheese, smoked bacon, a cage-free fried egg, and roasted chili peppers on a pretzel roll. The robust toppings amp up the flavor while adding a good dose of fat.

Short Order, in Los Angeles, features grass-fed beef in one of several unique sandwiches it calls “rafts.” Essentially a hybrid composed of a salad and a burger, the frisée raft features a grass-fed beef patty served open-faced and topped with frisée dressed in lemon-vinaigrette, artisan slab bacon, and a fried egg—a great combo of hot and cold, fresh and indulgent at the same time.

“Custom-grind” burgers are a premium grind of at least three whole-muscle cuts such as sirloin, chuck, or ribeye. The cuts often are chosen for a combination of flavor and fat, contain no trimmings, and are aged for 21 to 28 days to provide superior flavor. These rich, fatty grinds (some approaching a 70/30 mix) provide a kicked-up indulgence factor.

When your menu features a custom-grind burger, you can enhance perceived plate value by using menu descriptions to highlight why the ingredients make it special. At Chef Govind Armstrong’s 8-oz. Burger Bar restaurants (which use custom-grinds of sirloin, tri-tip, short rib, and chuck), the menu notes that burgers are made with grass-fed and house-blend beef.

Many restaurants offering these premium burgers forgo plentiful toppings in favor of one or two simple garnishes that really let the meat take center stage. Probably the best, and most original, example of a stripped-down, ultra-premium burger is the Black Label Burger at Minetta Tavern in New York: an exclusive signature grind of prime, dry-aged beef is hand-formed into generous patties and pan-fried on the griddle with copious amounts of clarified butter before being garnished simply with sweet caramelized onions. Even with a hefty $26 price tag, it makes up a whopping 50 percent of Minetta’s food sales. Conversely, Short Order bucks the “less is more” trend with its “Nancy’s Backyard Burger”—Nancy Silverton’s custom-beef blend—with artisan bacon, Comté cheese, avocado, tomato, onion, iceberg lettuce, and spicy mayonnaise. That burger is, without exaggeration, a masterpiece. Carefully constructed and exploding with flavor, it hits all the right notes.

WHERE’S THE BEEF?

But beef is not the only option for top-notch burgers. Turkey is popular, of course, but bison, chicken, pork, lamb, salmon, and tuna are all fair game as well. These milder-flavored meats present an ideal opportunity to play up other flavors, and offer a chance to really get creative with toppings. While these beef alternatives are inherently lower in fat, I strongly encourage you to resist creating a spa burger; these leaner patties need to rely heavily on luxurious cheeses, condiments, and toppings if you want to create a mouth-watering sandwich.

Based on what I’ve seen, pork is primed to become the next big thing in burgers. The best example I’ve encountered is at Acre restaurant in Chicago: a double pork patty cooked to medium, then layered with grilled pineapple, Mexican chorizo sausage, pepper-Jack cheese, and an ancho-chili mayonnaise. This burger is so flavorful, so memorable, and yet so simple. The only mystery is why I haven’t seen more like it. Just be sure that your grind isn’t too lean—80/20 is what you want to use.

A WORLD OF BURGERS

Many of today’s noteworthy burgers draw inspiration from around the globe. Incorporating unexpected flavors offers diners a surprising twist. More importantly, burgers with international flavor profiles—especially Asian—really work. Groundbreaking burgers combine unlikely ingredients to create something bigger than the sum of their parts. There is significant mainstream potential here. The key to successful fusion burgers is subtlety; the finished product should still be recognizable as a burger. Kalbi Burger in Los Angeles, for example, combines a custom-grind beef—rib and chuck patty with kimchee, Korean vinaigrette, American cheese, lettuce, tomato, and onion. It’s still a burger, only different.

Nationwide, trendsetting restaurants continue to push the limits with creative burgers. Luxury-meat grinds and premium beef offer indulgence without breaking the bank in terms of your food costs. Well-dressed with smart toppings, these are no ordinary hamburgers. If signature burgers can command up to 50 percent of sales, you know customers are hungry for more. This next phase of the “burger boom” provides more: more flavor, more indulgence, more love.