

taste

NORTH SHORE GUIDE TO EXCEPTIONAL CUISINE



PHOTO BY JIMMY HARRISON

THE Skookum Chief hamburger at The Tomahawk restaurant towers over a plate of fries. The longtime North Vancouver eatery lists a range of creative burger options on its menu.

80 years and still kickin'

More than just breakfast at N. Van's Tomahawk

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I like to think I'm a burger connoisseur.

I've travelled far and wide (across all of the Lower Mainland, that is) in search of the best patty-and-bun stack combo that I can find.

Along with my regular dinner date Big J, I've snacked on Vera's at Dundarave and Kits, made a meal out of the offerings at Burgers Etc. in Burnaby, and fallen in love with chopped steak at Moderne Burger on Broadway. I hadn't actually nailed down a favourite North Shore pick, although those at the Black Bear and Raven pubs, and at the Cactus Club Café all rate high.

It didn't occur to me to try burgers at The Tomahawk

— it's an eatery I visit when the craving hits for the huge, artery-clogging Yukon-Style breakfast: five gigantic strips of sizzling bacon, two eggs, a mountain of hash browns and two thick slices of toast. But then I noticed that readers like you have been naming the kitschy Norgate-area diner as your top burger spot in our own annual Readers' Choice Awards.

Perhaps because it's been there so long The Tomahawk is easy to overlook . . . but that would be a mistake.

North Vancouver resident Chick Chamberlain opened the original Tomahawk Barbecue in 1926, just a few feet away from where the current eatery sits, still family-run. Though the story goes that he had no idea how to cook,

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Tomahawk uses organic beef

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he learned fast. The best table in the house wasn't a table at all, but one of the 14 stools that semi-circled the grill — those same stools have since been recovered and line the counter today.

Adorning the walls is an extraordinary collection of North Shore and West Coast native artifacts. During the Depression, when many of his customers carried little more than lint in their pockets, Chamberlain often accepted items like handmade pots, drums, cooking utensils, totem poles and masks in exchange for food.

Most roadside-style diners delight in their greasy-spoon rep and make no effort to elevate their offerings any higher. But when we stopped in on a recent weeknight to sample the burgers, Big J and I took heed of all the personal touches and homemade cooking that goes into a meal at The Tomahawk.

Whether it's Fish & Chips or the Mixed Grill, Traditional Meat Loaf or the Roasted Turkey Dinner, many of the ingredients and the fixings get a fresh start in The Tomahawk's own kitchen: soups, gravy, dressings, even salad croutons are homemade; turkeys are roasted in-house; vegetables and toppings are fresh, rather than canned.

Nor is the burger list immune to the

focus on quality. Beef comes from the Blue Goose Cattle Company, a Cariboo-area cattle ranch that produces certified organic beef. The cows have never been given growth-hormones or antibiotics; are free to range and graze on organic pastures; and receive a finishing feed of organically grown grains. (The company's distribution warehouse is located in North Vancouver, by the way. Visit www.bluegoosecattle.com for information.)

I was keen to try one, but making a choice from this lengthy list (priced up to \$10.55) is a trick. As a tribute, many are named after First Nations chiefs known by Chamberlain.

The Chief August Jack Burger, Thunderbird Burger, Chief Mathias Joe Burger, Chief Dominic Charlie Burger and the Chief Simon Baker Burger all feature some combination of crisp lettuce and tomato, ground beef patty, aged cheddar, fresh sautéed mushrooms, grilled Yukon-style bacon and "Tomahawk special sauce."

I ordered the latter, and was delighted to find Simon Baker's beef patty not just topped by the fixings, but centred in a double strata of mushrooms, cheddar and bacon. With it I munched on a crunchy little salad of greens topped by a refreshing cranberry-orange dressing.

But the burgers grow even bigger.

Throw on a wiener and an egg, and you've got a Dagwood Super Hamburger, Chief Capilano Hamburger, or Big J's pick, the Skookum Chief Burger: a spectacular stack of onions, lettuce, organic ground beef patty, Yukon bacon, egg, aged cheddar cheese, wiener, tomato, and the sauce, all sided by a heap of darkly crunchy, flavourful onion rings.

Other options include the cod Seaburger, a Veggie Burger, the Potlatch Deluxe and the Tomahawk Pow Wow (with wiener slices), and the Tomahawk Totem.

When we arrived at 5:30 p.m. we were first in the restaurant and our server had no trouble offering suggestions, answering questions about the menu and zipping out Boylan Natural Sodas with which to wash down our meals. Even when the tide of customers began to flow she did an admirable job of juggling seating, serving and making change until the next staffer began his shift.

The tally for our burger banquet added up to \$27.76, including taxes. While they aren't the cheapest on the block, this is a place where you get what you pay for, and true burger lovers will gladly pony up.

North Shore News dining reviews are conducted anonymously.

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