



Hamburger

A Global History

Andrew F. Smith

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HAMBURGER



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REAKTION BOOKS

Published by Reaktion Books Ltd
33 Great Sutton Street
London EC1V 0DX
www.reaktionbooks.co.uk

First published 2008

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Printed and bound in China by C&C Offset Printing Co., Ltd

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Smith, Andrew F. (Andrew Franklin), 1946–

Hamburger : a global history. – (Edible)

1. Hamburgers

2. Hamburgers – History

I. Title

641.8'4

ISBN-13: 978 1 86189 390 1

Contents

Introduction	7
1 Humble Hamburger Beginnings	11
2 The Hamburger Chain	25
3 The McDonald's Machine	42
4 McDonald Clones	64
5 The Hamburger Experience	76
6 The Global Burger	87
7 Hamburgers Today and Tomorrow	111
Recipes	125
Select Bibliography	138
Websites and Associations	140
Acknowledgements	142
Photo Acknowledgements	144
Index	145



Introduction



My first recollection of eating away from home was at a little hamburger stand across the street from a park in Sunland, California, where I spent my early years. Fifty-eight years later I can still remember the portly elderly proprietor, his white apron splotted with grease, ketchup and mustard. His compact lunch wagon, fitted with a grill for cooking the beef patties, was hardly big enough to contain his bulk. I don't recall side orders, cold drinks, desserts or French fries – just the hamburgers. Our family always ordered five hamburgers, at a total cost of one dollar – quite a bargain in 1950. As far as I can remember, we were his only customers, which was just as well because he took at least ten minutes to cook, garnish and wrap our burgers. When you're four years old and hungry, ten minutes can be an eternity. We ate in the car or at picnic bench, and then ran back to play in the park.

My memories of the neighbourhood hamburger vendor were eclipsed five years later by my first visit to McDonald's. Compared with the little cart in the park, McDonald's was a dazzling palace. The building was clean, spacious, colourful and brightly lit. Through the forward-tilting glass façade where we placed our order, the staff – clean-cut teenage boys



Hamburger stands were often outdoors, where customers were covered only with an awning, such as the one above in Harlingen, Texas, 1939.

– could be seen going about their tasks with quasi-military precision. There were lots of people queuing but service was speedy and the waiting time was brief. The menu was very limited – hamburgers, cheeseburgers, French fries, malts or fizzy drinks – but it was exactly what the customers wanted. What’s more, the food was cheap: you could get an entire meal for less than 50 cents, and a family of four could be reasonably sated for under three dollars.

The billboard outside proudly announced that McDonald’s had sold over a million hamburgers. To me, this was simply an unimaginable quantity and, frankly, I didn’t believe it. At the time, McDonald’s had just started franchising, and there were only a dozen or so outlets in the Los Angeles area. It was inconceivable that such a small chain could have served so many burgers in such a short time.

Times have changed, and so has my perception of McDonald’s. Sixty years after its founding, in 1948, as a small octagonal restaurant on E Street in San Bernardino,

California, McDonald's is a massive multinational conglomerate with more than 30,000 restaurants and an estimated 250,000 employees worldwide. Their signs now boast that they have sold more than 100 billion hamburgers, which works out to about sixteen burgers for every person alive in the world today.

The hamburger sandwich first appeared in the United States as a minor street food in the late nineteenth century. Within just a few decades the succulent sandwich became the focus of a whole new food distribution model: the 'fast-food' industry, which revolutionized the way Americans ate. From its birthplace, the hamburger was introduced to other countries, and by the late twentieth century it was the foundation of one of the fastest-growing businesses in the world.

The hamburger's rise to global prominence is a lively story, peopled with short-order cooks and top-flight chefs, street vendors and captains of industry, family-run diners and massive conglomerates, burger barons and vegetarians,



Interior of a small hamburger stand in the 1930s, Alpine, Texas, 1939.

hard-hitting advertisers and health-food advocates, fast-food freaks and 'slow-food' purists, hard-nosed critics and flavour-conscious aficionados. The hamburger sandwich has achieved this success through its adaptability to local cultures and tastes, and in the process it has changed the world.

Hamburger Fakelore

Like so many other matters related to culinary history, the hamburger's origins are shrouded in 'fakelore'. The Tartars had nothing to do with the hamburger; the citizens of Hamburg, Germany, had only a remote connection with the sandwich. There are several contenders for the title of 'inventor' of the hamburger sandwich, but no primary evidence has surfaced to support any of their claims. The frequently cited Delmonico's menu, dated 1834 and featuring 'Hamburg Steak', is a fake. The oft-quoted 1904 newspaper story about the hamburger vendor at the Louis and Clark Exposition in St Louis who supposedly invented the hamburger sandwich has not been identified, and even if it were, it would clearly not be the first instance of a hamburger sandwich in America. Ray Kroc did not found McDonald's and the first McDonald's restaurant was not in Des Plaines, Illinois.

I

Humble Hamburger Beginnings



In November 2006, Representative Betty Brown introduced a resolution into the Texas Legislature that formally designated Athens, Texas, as the ‘Original Home of the Hamburger’. She based her resolution on the belief that Fletcher Davis had invented the hamburger at his lunch counter in Athens sometime during the 1880s. Hearings were held on this resolution, and it passed the Texas legislature in March 2007. Not to be outdone, the Wisconsin state legislature passed a resolution in August 2007 proclaiming Charlie Nagreen as the inventor of the hamburger and the town of Seymour as the real ‘Home of the Hamburger’. Other prominent contenders who have been proclaimed inventors of the hamburger include the brothers Frank and Charles Menches, who reportedly served up the first burger sandwich in 1885 at the Erie County Fair in New York, and Louis Lassen of New Haven, Connecticut, who is credited for doing so around 1900.

Each of these cases has one thing in common – no primary evidence has surfaced to support its claims. Who really invented the hamburger sandwich – strictly defined as a hot ground-beef patty served between two pieces of bread – will probably never be known, but what is clear is that this

combination arrived late in the nineteenth century, long after the invention of the sandwich and of the ground-beef patty.

The Invention of the Sandwich

The hamburger's remote roots date back to eighteenth-century England, the supposed birthplace of the sandwich. In the 1760s a Frenchman, Pierre-Jean Grosley, visited London and, upon his return to France, wrote about his experiences. His book became the most popular eighteenth-century travel guide to London. In it Grosley recounted how a minister of state had played cards for 24 hours straight, sustaining himself by eating only beef between two pieces of bread. Grosley claimed that this 'dish' was named for the ministerial gambling fiend. Grosley did not name the dish or identify its inventor, but Edward Gibbon, future author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, reported in his journal that he had eaten a 'Sandwich' at the Cocoa-Tree, a fashionable gentlemen's gaming club, on 24 November 1762. Place these two sources together and the inventor of the dish would appear to be John Montagu, the Fourth Earl of Sandwich, who served as Minister of the Admiralty during the 1760s. In fact, the Earl is unlikely to have been the first person to consume a slice of beef between two slices of bread, but he has nevertheless been credited with the creation of the sandwich ever since.

Whatever its origin, the sandwich was simple to make and easy to eat. Its convenience contributed to its success. So did its taste: its multi-layers provided a vehicle for a diversity of flavours and textures, while its main components, such as bread and beef, remained relatively discrete. The sandwich first became fashionable in English high society.

By the 1770s, recipes for sandwiches appeared in English cookbooks and by the early nineteenth century similar recipes appeared in the United States. Most recipes instructed that sandwiches be constructed of very thin slices of bread, day-old sponge cakes or small rolls cut into bite-sized squares or triangles. Suggested fillings included cheese, ham, shrimp, oysters, potted meats, crabs, lobster, prawns, sausages, tongue, anchovies and poultry. These dainty pieces were served by hostesses at luncheons, teas, suppers and picnics, packed in baskets for the convenience of travellers, and were also sold in tea rooms. The little sandwiches were served on a platter; since they were small enough to be eaten whole, there was no need for individual plates.

In the United States, the sandwich travelled in a different direction. Diminutive sandwiches were served in upper-class households, but the working classes demanded heartier, more varied and substantial sandwiches made on large rolls. These sandwiches were often served at taverns and bars. A British observer, describing American bar counters in 1880, reported that they were loaded with huge piles of mammoth beef sandwiches, one of which, he claimed, was sufficient for a full meal. He was amazed to see how quickly they were consumed. These sandwiches were often given away in bars in the hope that the free lunch would encourage the customers to buy more drinks.

Beef was used as a sandwich filling from the very beginning, and recipes for thinly sliced beef and mustard sandwiches appeared in many cookbooks. Popular as they were, beef sandwiches were not for everyone. Even thin slices of meat in soft bread could be difficult to chew, particularly for individuals who had few or no teeth – a not-uncommon condition in the nineteenth century. Neither could people with poor digestion eat sliced or even chopped beef. Medical

professionals in Europe and the United States recommended raw beef for patients with digestive problems, a very common complaint in the nineteenth century. Raw lean beef was finely chopped and spread on bread, or its juices were extracted, heated and served as 'beef tea'. By the 1870s, recipes for raw scraped beef were published and thereafter appeared in European and American cookbooks, such as Elizabeth S. Miller's *In the Kitchen* (1875). In *The Boston Cooking School Cook Book* (1887) Mary J. Lincoln wrote that raw beef sandwiches might be found more palatable if toasted. A better way of serving raw beef, Steak Tartare, appeared on restaurant menus and in British cookbooks, such as ones by Charles Herman Senn, *Recherché Side Dishes* (1901) (see p. 127).

In 1867 a New York physician, James H. Salisbury, spoke out against eating raw beef, which he and other medical professionals believed caused disease. Salisbury suggested as an alternative that the scraped beef should be pressed into patties about an inch thick and grilled. He recommended adding condiments such as butter, pepper, salt, Worcestershire sauce, mustard, horseradish or lemon juice, if desired (see p. 126). By 1889, recipes for 'Salisbury Steak' appeared in medical works and in cookbooks. Similar recipes appeared under other names, such as the more common phrase 'Hamburg steak', which became prevalent during the late nineteenth century. The name 'Salisbury steak' did not become popular on menus until World War I, when the German-sounding term was replaced with patriotic alternatives. Under any name, these beef patties were served on a plate and eaten with a knife and fork.

The difficulty in preparing these steaks was the laborious process of scraping the raw beef. The popularization of the meat grinder made this job infinitely easier. Although home-made meat grinders had existed since at least the 1840s and

commercial grinders had been sold since the 1850s, they were not common in American households. When meat grinders were featured at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876, they quickly became a kitchen necessity. Commercial meat grinders such as the Enterprise Chopper and the American Chopper became popular. By the 1880s, medical professionals, including Dr Salisbury, publicly endorsed the American Chopper for making medicinal beef preparations. Endorsements from chefs and cookery teachers soon followed.

The meat grinder was a great asset to butchers, who could now use unsaleable or undesirable scraps and organ meats that might otherwise have been tossed out. It also became possible to add non-meat ingredients to the ground beef, and it was very hard for the consumer to know what was actually in the mixture. Ground meat was cheap, ideal to sell to the working classes, and by adding even cheaper fillers, such as gristle, skin and excess fat, the butcher could enhance his already substantial profit.

Hamburg Beef

Real Hamburg beef was an expensive gourmet food in the nineteenth century. In theory it was a product from cows raised in the countryside around Hamburg, Germany, where it was prepared in many ways. One common way to prepare fresh Hamburg beef was to chop it, season it and form it into patties, but it would have to be used immediately. Prior to the advent of freezers, beef had to be preserved in other ways: it could be smoked, dried, salted or made into spiced sausages. As Hamburg beef was expensive outside northern Germany, recipes for making these patties with any type of beef were

published in many nineteenth-century cookbooks. Beef patties became common throughout Europe, Great Britain and North America under a variety of names. In England and the United States, they were called chopped, minced or scraped beef patties, beef cakes, beefsteak cakes and sausage-meat cakes. The beef was frequently combined with other chopped meat, such as pork and lamb. Onions, garlic, salt and pepper were common patty seasonings. The patty was sometimes served raw but was more usually grilled or fried.

Germans had migrated to America since the seventeenth century, establishing communities in many regions, particularly in Pennsylvania. After the failed revolution of 1848, German refugees poured into major American cities, including New York, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, St Louis and Chicago. Then, as now, one of the few areas of employment open to immigrants in cities was the food business. Many German immigrants worked on farms, while their urban cousins opened butcher shops, restaurants and delicatessens. By the late 1860s, German restaurants attracted a wide variety of patrons who were enticed by the tasty and inexpensive foreign food.

Hamburg steak first appeared on the menus of German restaurants in America during the early 1870s. Auguste Ermisch's restaurant in New York, for example, served Hamburger steak in 1873. According to a *New York Times* article, it was 'simply a beefsteak redeemed from its original toughness by being mashed into mincemeat and then formed into a conglomerated mass. This is very appetizing, but conscience compels us to state that it is inferior to the genuine article, which can also be had here in a very satisfactory condition of tenderness.' Hamburg steak was an inexpensive dish made by grinding beef not otherwise used for choice cuts, such as porterhouse or sirloin steak.

The name Hamburg steak would not have sounded unusual to the average American consumer. There were already familiar American foods named after European cities, including frankfurters (from Frankfurt), wieners (from Vienna) and Hamburg sausage (Hamburg). 'Hamburg steak' sounded much more elegant than 'ground beef'. It combined the cachet of foreignness with a word denoting a fine cut of quality beef. That it only cost eight or ten cents was a bonus. From the restaurateur's viewpoint, the dish was made with scraps that would otherwise have been used to make sausages or stocks. With commercial meat grinders readily available by the 1870s, Hamburg steak was easy and cheap to prepare and, properly seasoned, quite delicious.

Hamburg steak might well have remained just one item on the menu of cheap German eateries had it not been for Philadelphia's Centennial Exposition, held in 1876. During the six months that the Exposition was open, more than ten million visitors viewed the exhibits and ate at the restaurants, one of which, a German restaurant, was sponsored by Philip J. Lauber of Philadelphia. Lauber had paid the hefty sum of \$6,000 for the right to construct a German restaurant at the fair, and then paid the astronomical sum of \$56,000 to build a two-storey facility with a large tented courtyard in the middle. The restaurant featured German bands, German food and German beer and wine. It could accommodate 1,200 customers simultaneously, and the service was fast and efficient. Even though Lauber's restaurant burned down before the Exposition ended, it was still identified as the most successful restaurant at the fair. Thousands of customers dined at Lauber's daily. According to a contemporary article in the *New York Tribune*, one of the more popular items was Hamburg steak.

The Philadelphia fair gave the Hamburg steak wide visibility. By the 1880s the dish was appearing on menus of

non-German restaurants and cookbooks contained recipes for it. Newspapers reported on this new delicacy, often describing how it was made. In 1887, for instance, the *Chicago Tribune* noted that Hamburg steak was ‘made by chopping any lean piece of beef and cooking it with onions or garlic’. In North Dakota, the *Bismark Tribune* claimed that this new dish was prepared by a German meat market proprietor and that the concept was imported from New York. In 1889 Jessup Whitehead, the English-born Chicago restaurateur and author, wrote that Hamburg steak consisted of ‘beef sausage meat containing minced onion and a slight flavor of garlic, formed in flat round pats and fried in butter; served either as plain steak for breakfast, or with various sauces as a dinner entrée’.

The Hamburg steak patty was often served with onions, gravy, mashed potatoes or French fries and vegetables. By 1900 it was a common dish in most restaurants in the United States, but was still served on a plate and eaten with a knife and fork.

The Invention of the Hamburger Sandwich

The Hamburg steak’s leap from plate to sandwich was a simple one that seems inevitable from today’s perspective. But it took almost two decades before the sandwich met the Hamburg steak. The invention of the hamburger sandwich was fostered by the industrialization of America. In the late nineteenth century, factories sprang up around many cities, particularly in New England, the middle states and the Midwest. Workers usually lived some distance from the newly constructed factories, and it was impossible for them to go home for lunch or dinner, as they had in the past. Workers

often carried their meals to work with them, but other types of food service were developed to meet this need. Some large factories, for instance, opened cafeterias.

During the day, workers could go to grocery outlets, or visit street vendors on their way to or from work. However, as industrialization spread, many factories began operating at night. As virtually all groceries, cafeterias and restaurants closed in the early evening, feeding the night shift was a particular problem. The lack of food also affected other people who happened to be out at night. Walter Scott of Providence, Rhode Island, wisely saw this as an opportunity. In 1872, he constructed a handcart (subsequently converted into the popular Pioneer Lunch Wagon) and filled it with sandwiches, boiled eggs, buttered bread, pies and coffee. At around 8 p.m. he'd park it outside the local newspaper-printing plant, which operated through the night, and sat inside waiting for customers. Workers would come out to the cart, order and receive their food through a side window, and either eat their meal standing nearby or take it elsewhere.

Another Providence entrepreneur, Ruel B. Jones, saw Scott's success and decided that with a larger lunch cart he could sell more food and of course make more money. The larger wagon was successful and by 1887 Jones had acquired several of them, which he moved to different locations in the city, according to the proximity of potential customers. Other proprietors saw this success and began operating in Providence and other cities. In Worcester, Massachusetts, Sam Jones, Ruel's nephew, constructed a 'lunch wagon' with a complete kitchen. This caused a stir, and a boom in the construction of lunch wagons ensued. They were variously called 'fancy night cafés', 'night lunch wagons' and 'owl lunch wagons'.

Unlike previous models, the new lunch wagons had gas grills so they could serve hot food. One favourite food served by street vendors was the sausage, also called the frankfurter or wiener in America. As these were hard to eat standing up without plates and utensils, placing them in a bun made sense. By the 1870s, special frankfurter buns were being manufactured. Sausages in buns became popular at fairs, amusement parks, sporting events and other large gatherings. They were simple to make, cheap to buy and easy to eat. The composition of the sausages was frequently questioned, and some suggested that the cheap wieners were made from dog meat. Yale students began calling the night wagons 'dog wagons' and the term 'hot dog' had emerged by the 1890s.

Another product served in lunch wagons was Hamburg steak. Like the sausage, it consisted of ground meat but, unlike the sausage, Hamburg steak was made from fresh, raw meat which needed to be heated before it could be served. When lunch wagons began heating food on grills, Hamburg steak was a logical addition to the menu. Because many customers ate their food standing up, placing the beef patty in a bun made sense. Who was the first lunch wagon proprietor to sell the Hamburg steak between two pieces of bread is unknown, but, by the 1890s, it had already become an American classic. Reports of the 'hamburger steak sandwich' appear in newspaper accounts in far-flung places. In Reno, Nevada, the *Evening Gazette* reported in 1893 that "Tom Fraker's celebrated Hamburger steak sandwiches are always on hand to replenish an empty stomach and even fortify Satan himself". In Chicago, an article in the *Tribune* reported: 'A distinguished favorite, only five cents, is Hamburger steak sandwich, the meat for which is kept ready in small patties and cooked while you wait on a gasoline range.' In Los



Even small hamburger stands usually had booths, such as the one above in Alpine, Texas, 1939.

Angeles the hamburger was defined as ‘a sandwich with a filling of chipped meat and onions’. Hamburgers were even enjoyed in Hawaii before the islands were annexed by the United States.

As hamburgers grew in popularity, lunch wagons sold as many as 400 in a day. In Decatur, Illinois, the local paper recorded that hamburger stands were ‘legion’ and that, late at night, the vendor was ‘the busiest man in town’. The article went on to estimate that 25,000 hamburgers were sold in Decatur during a single day in 1902. Restaurants began serving hamburger sandwiches, and recipes for making them were published in mainstream cookbooks by the 1910s, although they did not commonly appear until the 1920s and ’30s.

Early recipes reflected the variety of ways that hamburgers were made at the time. Eva Greene Fuller’s recipe for ‘Hamburger Steak Sandwich’, published in *The Up-to-date Sandwich Book* (1927), makes no mention of a beef patty – only fried ground hamburger (see p. 127). Florence A. Cowles, who



An apron-clad woman cooks hamburgers in the kitchen. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1950.

published three sandwich books, included six recipes for 'Hamburg' sandwiches in her 1929 work. In many of these recipes the ground beef was not shaped into patties, but spread on buttered bread. When her book was published in England, however, all of the recipes for hamburger sandwiches were removed by the editors.

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