



GOURMET BURGER COMPANY (482 Parliament, at Carlton, 647-344-5103)
Complete meals for \$15 per person, including all taxes, tip and a soda. Average main \$7.
Open daily 11:30 am to 9 pm. Closed some holidays. Unlicensed. Access: bump at door, no washrooms, counter seating.

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The beet goes on

Gourmet Burger Company has some unusual ideas for toppings

By Steven Davey

Does hogtown really need another burger joint?

We already have numerous worthy Happy Days-style drive-ins – Eglinton West's Burger Shack, Thornhill's Golden Star, the ubiquitous Lick's – and downtown's been doing upwardly mobile takes on the fast food classic at trendy Queen West bistros like the Queen Mother, the Peter Pan and the Rivoli since the 70s.

Want more? The burgers come vegetarian at Utopia on College, exotic at Stampede Bison Grill in Parkdale and ostentatiously festooned with shaved truffles for 37 bucks a pop at Mark McEwan's Bymark in the former financial district.

But until John Ward launched his Gourmet Burger Company in Cabbagetown late last fall, Toronto had never tasted an Australian hamburger. Who knew what wonders we be missing?



I'll admit I'm a bit skeptical when I first scan the upscale take-away's chalkboard lineup. Its description of GBC's flagship Aussie burger (\$8.50) starts off promisingly enough – 6 ounces of aged, lean never-frozen house-ground Canadian beef topped with regulation bacon, lettuce, tomato, Hellman's mayo and gooey cheddar cheese – but veers into previously uncharted territory with the addition of a fried egg, grilled pineapple and beets.

Call me Crocodile Dundee and throw me on the barbie, but the initial mouthfuls are bloody corkers. My first bite lacerates the egg, allowing its runny yolk to bleed into the marvellously moist patty, ramping up the protein in the process. The second reveals an unexpected play of savoury and sweet: double-smoked bacon and cheddar stick with tradition, but grilled pineapple and honey-poached beets send the burger in an entirely new direction. Like Dame Edna's fashion sense, it's a mess, but it works.

Why, there's even a burger called The Works (\$6.95) that keeps the banquet basics of the Aussie but trades the egg, pineapple and beets for more familiar sautéed button mushrooms and caramelized balsamic onions.

The only one of the dozen or so burgers I try that doesn't work for me is the Spicy Cajun beef burger (\$5.95), the marriage of lettuce, tomato and lemony avocado purée with chipotle mayo, pickled jalapeño and jalapeño havarti grounds for divorce.

Besides the signature versions, all of GBC's burgers can be customized from a generous list of mostly free fixins. My first stab at the quite okay house-made veggie burger (\$5.50) finds me piling on the beets, lettuce, tomato, sautéed mushrooms, onions and roasted garlic mayo as well as grilled portobellos and pineapple (\$1 extra each).

For my second, I assemble a more manageable combo of lettuce, tomato and beets in GBC sauce (aka ketchup and mayonnaise), with additional fried egg, pineapple and aged white cheddar (\$1 each), a veritable vejeo spin on the Aussie. I pair the grilled free-range chicken breast burger with slivered red onion, dill pickle and smoked Gouda (\$6.95), but keep the finely ground New Zealand lamb burger simple with roasted red peppers and Brie (\$7.50).

Sides are just as bonzer. Fries come two ways, either as chunky Yukon Gold frites or skinny sweet-potato shoestrings. And though beer-battered onion rings (all \$2.95) come unabashedly from a box, they're still better than most served elsewhere. Salads are another surprise, the Caesar rife with romaine and real bacon, the Green a mix of organic mesclun, carrot sticks and dried cranberries, all in a tart raspberry vinaigrette (both \$2.95 small/\$4.95 large).

Sure, Gourmet Burger Co. has the air of a franchise-in-waiting. The decor appears to be a cross between Chippy's and Black Camel (dark chocolate walls, gleaming white tile, minimal counter seating), and the concept seems to be lifted wholesale from the UK's like-named and Kiwi-owned Gourmet Burger Kitchen chain, right down to the runny fried eggs, pineapple and what the colonials refer to as beetroot.

While Aussie expat Ward dismisses the similarities – “Every corner shop back home makes burgers like these” – he does admit that he plans to open the first of many more GBCs in the downtown core this spring. The secret to his pending success?

“I build a better burger.”

One topped with beets, no less.

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Photo By David Laurence

