



The Best Bacon Cheeseburger In Orange County

Just close your eyes and imagine it...a fat juicy hamburger nestled under a layer of melted cheese that fairly drips down the sides, topped with faintly smoky, crisp, but not brittle, bacon, and crowned with lettuce and tomato so alternately crunchy and juicy that it rattles your teeth and slathers your tongue. Yes, imagine this masterpiece swaddled in a lightly toasted sun golden bun right next to a chorus of crisp hot sizzling fries, all guarded by a catsup bottle and a ice cold fizzy cola. It is an image so powerful and tantalizing that I must steady myself with one hand lest I swoon.

Okay...maybe...not...that...powerful, but still; we're talking about a bacon cheeseburger here...the ultimate in that oh so American born and bred culinary tradition...the Mom and Pop.

Fully six months ago, I launched a quest to find the holy grail of bacon cheeseburgers in Orange County. I traveled from Lake of the Woods to Gordonsville and places in between. I suffered unimaginable hardship: an extra two notches in my belt, a half dozen pounds on the bathroom scale, and a score of points on my LDL. But it was worth it. Besides, **SOMEBODY** had to do this job.

Why a bacon cheeseburger, you ask? Well, besides the fact that it is the very pinnacle of the Mom and Pop culinary endeavor, as described above; it is also a level playing field. It would be hard to compare one Mom and Pop's blue plate special to another's. How could you objectively compare Harriet and Bob's meat loaf, mashed potatoes and green beans to Alice and Jim's fried chicken, collards and corn. You just can't! It wouldn't be right!

So, without any further ado, let me outline some of the

ground rules of this competition. I only sampled bacon cheeseburgers and only at Mom and Pops...no fast food franchises, no restaurants that specialize in something else like pizza or Mexican or Chinese, or gourmet or whatever. To make my list, you don't even have to be a Mom and/or a Pop; you just had to be a true blue locally owned and operated American restaurant that offers a bacon cheeseburger on your menu.

This was a tough assignment. After all, how badly can you screw up a bacon cheeseburger for crimminy sakes. They're all about the same, right? Well, not really. But to make that level playing field a little wider, I ordered the same combo every time: a bacon cheeseburger with fries and a drink. And although I am not out here to debate, like some haughty wine steward, the finer points of Pepsi vs. Coke, I did take the fries into account.

I also considered other factors: price versus value; service, how long did it take to arrive? If I visited them, were the restrooms clean? The décor, how appropriate is it to the dish I'm ordering. I mean who ever ate a bacon cheeseburger listening to classical music in a fine arts museum? Jeesh.

Finally, I should mention that I did not go snooping around these restaurants in disguise like some redneck Ruth Reichl of the *New York Times*. But, neither did I pre-announce my intentions of writing a review. Hey, as far as the restaurateurs are concerned, I'm just a starving writer trying to have lunch.

So what follows, in no particular order, is a restaurant-by-restaurant review. By my best count there are ten of you out there, and all ten of you make a great bacon cheeseburger. But only one of you makes the best...



James and Barbara Barnett have a great little hang out here on Madison Road in Orange. With its Orange County High School sports theme and multiple wall-mounted TV's all tuned to sports channels, it is the place to go after a football game.

They have some great signs too, like: "Hot Beer, Lousy Food, Bad Service. Welcome. Have a Nice Day." Only two of those five actually turned out to be true... the part about being welcome and having a nice day.

Although their specialty is Barbecue, in particular the Baby Back Ribs, all smoked on site, they make a mighty good bacon cheeseburger. My notes also say, "great fries and plenty of them too." And despite the sign that reads, "this is not a fast food restaurant. Please allow us time to prepare your meal..." the order arrived within ten minutes.

At \$6.95, it was a teeny bit on the high end, but not outrageously so. Fries are extra as is the drink, but not much. High marks all around.



Seven years now Jeanette and Arlie Breeden have operated this cavernous (92 seating capacity) restaurant in what used to be the old Silk Mill. A fascinating collection of old bobbins and spinners and other silk manufacturing doodads adorn the walls or are suspended from the ceiling.

This is a nice easy-going place with large screen TV's tuned to various sports and news channels. Their dinner menu is extensive. The bacon cheeseburger was excellent, but the fries were a little bit on the skimpy side. I like it when I can put the last bite of my burger in my mouth with one hand just as I'm scooping the last two or three fries in the catsup pool with the other. Am I weird?

And while we're on the topic, let me tell you up front, I

am one of those guys who considers catsup a major food group. At the Silk Mill I found it a little odd that the catsup arrived in a tiny bowl that would normally hold a dollop of mayonnaise. When I order a burger and fries, I want them accompanied by a whole squeeze bottle of catsup. Trust me, I'll use most of it!

One more note on the Silk Mill. The men's room was so clean that if they had said they were going to serve me on the restroom floor, I would have seriously considered it. Absolutely spotless!

When Jean and her brother Grant McDaniel decided to put the



adjoining restaurant and tire businesses on Caroline Street up for sale, she moved the cafe to where it is today at the corner of Main Street and Railroad Avenue. What is it about an established reputation and a name that guarantees success. The poor guy who made a go of it in this same space, barely lasted a year. Now, as Jean's Place, this quintessential Mom and Pop is doing a roaring business. Walk in the door and you're bound to run into somebody you know.

The day I went, it was freezing cold. Still I had to wait for a table, and when I was finally seated, it was by the door. So every time someone came in, which was often, I was blasted.

They had only moved in two weeks prior, so the half hour it took between ordering and receiving my food is forgiven considering the circumstances. And, when it finally arrived, the burger was excellent mostly because the bacon was still sizzling; it was so freshly cooked. Most places cook the bacon way ahead of time and keep it in a warmer. Not here.

My notes say, "fries Okay, but not great." Ho hum.

This place too had a spotless bathroom and, ta da, catsup in a squeeze bottle!



This is another quintessential Mom and Pop, right down to the intentionally misspelled sign and the somewhat shopworn interior. That cracked linoleum and torn leatherette is perfect! I wouldn't have it any other way.

And the music! Old fashioned classic country, not that Pabulum they've been serving out of Nashville for the past 20 years! Real singers who have really experienced the lyrics in their songs; guys like Hank Williams, George Jones and Merle Haggard. It doesn't get any better than this.

Also, I have a funny feeling that this place really shines at breakfast. Any restaurant brave enough to offer this meal all day long has got to be good!

The burger was fine, and although it was a little small, it was obviously handmade because it came apart while I ate it, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. Also the iceberg lettuce and tomato were fresh and crunchy, even in mid winter. And the curly fries were hands down the best I've ever tasted!

This is the second place I saw a sign that says "We are not a fast food restaurant. Your patience is appreciated while we prepare your order." The food arrived in less than ten minutes. That's plenty fast!

Hey, everybody, slow down!

The burger was priced at \$4.95, which is more than reasonable. But the fries were \$2.95. Still, they are the best I've ever had. You get what you pay for.



Imagine my surprise when I first walked in the front door of this place to be greeted by a credenza bearing bottles of Mouton Cadet Bordeaux. A magnificent bar stretches to the vanishing point on the right. On the left real cloth napkins adorn damask covered tables. Old fashioned belt driven fans twirl lazily overhead. A magnificent collection of Civil War era photographs gaze sternly from the walls. Soft jazz pulses a little too loud. The dinner menu has lots of foreign words.

Oops, I'm in the wrong place. Besides, there's nobody here. Still, I tentatively take a table and wait. A waitress comes out. She takes my order. I sit in silence. I decide to check out the restroom, which, I must report is in need of the ministrations of a mop and bucket...at least on this day. Coming out of the bathroom, I see a pair of swinging doors with the sounds of conversation emanating from behind.

It's the back room! This is where I'm supposed to be. I find the waitress and tell her I've moved and sit down at a vacant table. A few regulars puff cigarettes and nurse their long neck Buds at the bar as they half heartedly dabble in video poker. NASCAR reruns are playing on TV's in all four corners of the room. A digital jukebox jangles; electronic pinball pings. Welcome to a 21st century loyal-order-of-the-scarlet-nape hangout.

Despite the digital this and the electronic that, it still takes 25 minutes for my monster burger to arrive. And she forgot the bacon and didn't bring enough catsup. But then something happens that completely changes my lukewarm opinion of this place. She calls me "sweetie."

Oh man, I'm a goner for a waitress who calls me "sweetie."

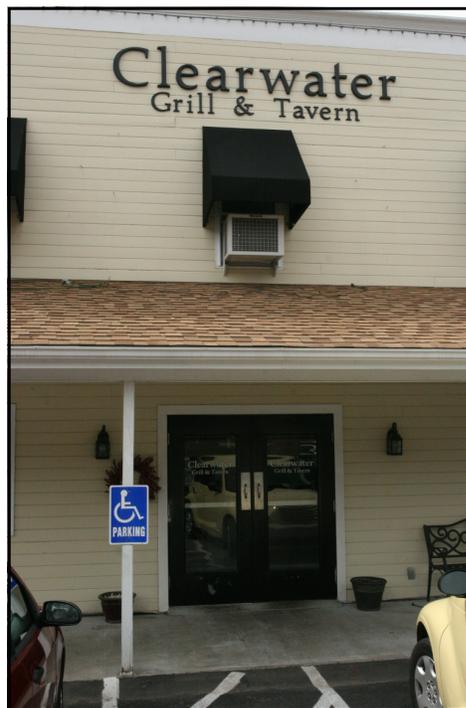


Let's head on up the road out of Orange and go to Unionville. There on the corner is Marshall Farms. That's just a cheese store, right? Nope it's a qualifying Mom and Pop and they make a mighty good bacon cheeseburger. It's big and handmade too, served on a giant Kaiser roll, which is always my favorite!

And here's their ace in the hole. It had the best cheese of any of the places I reviewed. Well, duh, that's what they make here. But seriously, the cheese is what made this burger. I don't know which one of their eight artisan cheeses they used; I just know it was good.

The bacon, however was a little brittle, and fries are not even on the menu, so my notes are incomplete here. Still this a great place to drop in for breakfast or lunch, and I have a feeling their sandwiches such as their Hot Tuna melt or Roast Beef Cheddar are where they really shine.

Besides they have Hi Speed wireless, a gift shop, a deli, specialty coffees, natural and organic groceries, local wines, and of course award-winning cheeses.



Located just down Route 3 from Lake of the Woods, I seem to remember that this place, under different ownership, used to be a rough and tumble honky tonk. Well, it has shaken off that image admirably and become a highly respectable up town dining establishment. The furnishings are high end; the art on the walls is appropriate; the lighting is mood; the uniformed staff bustles efficiently. But, it qualifies as a Mom and Pop because it is locally owned and operated.

The bacon cheddar burger at \$8.29, including fries, takes about 20 to 25 minutes. But it is worth the wait, for it is truly char-

broiled. And the shoestring fries are magnificent. Best of all, the waitress was pleasant, cheerful, and helpful.

I want to come back to this place and have dinner. The brief descriptions in the menu of their seafood, pastas, ribs, steaks and especially their house favorites are mouth watering.

We go all the way back to Gordonsville now where I almost overlooked this latest addition to Main Street... Cannelle. You mean to tell me this French bakery has a bacon cheeseburger???

Like Redd Fox of Sanford and Son, I stagger back, clutch my chest in mock heart attack and growl, "this is the big one, Martha."



But yes, they do make a cheeseburger, and it is excellent. You have to ask for the bacon, and the cheese is more like shaved parmesan, and it is served on French bread instead of a bun with a salad not fries. And it doesn't really qualify because it costs slightly more than the \$10 limit I have arbitrarily imposed on this competition.

But oh boy is it ever good. Obviously handmade, these thick lean rare prime beef patties just make you shiver, and the light salad that accompanies it instead of those pesky pound packing fries, is not only good to you but good for you.

Yum yum.



Other restaurants come and go, but the Inwood lasts forever. This Mom and Pop has been here since most people can remember, and if you are of the school that judges restaurants by how full their parking lots are, then this is your place. You'll also run into somebody you know here, including the police officer who busted you for failing to yield at the Gordonsville circle a couple hundred yards away.

Sit at the counter so you can experience the banter that goes on between the cook and the waitresses. It's so funny, they could take this act on the road.

Oh! I almost forgot...the bacon cheeseburger. It was pretty good, with two strips of bacon, lettuce and tomato. It was so juicy

the bun split in half. The fries were kind of old fashioned thick and soggy like you would find at the state fair...just the way they're supposed to be at a place with this much history! Somehow, paprika and garlic encrusted shoestring French-fried potatoes would, sniff, just not make it here.

Really, the daily specials are where this place is at. The guy sitting at the counter next to me says his chicken fried steak "cuts like butter." And if you've got any room left, tuck into one of those homemade pies. They're famous.

And the winner is.....**THE LUNCHBOX GRILL!**

When I first went to this place right after it opened, I was a little put off by the off brand catsup. It didn't taste quite right, and you know by now how much I like my catsup.

The next time I went, the catsup was vastly improved, but I was just a little perplexed by the bacon. It seemed like it had been shredded, not like bacon bits mind you, but pulled in pieces instead of whole traditional strips. Then I decided it was about the best thing I ever put in my mouth.



So I came back a third time, and I'm here to tell you that although the magnificent collection of antique and collectible lunch boxes is gone, the food is as good or even better than before. Wanda Kerkines and her family have it down right.

She let me watch as she cooked my burger. Here's the secret: Gigantic pre-cooked burgers sit in a warm broth awaiting their fate on the grill. When the order comes in,

Wanda Kerkines shows off her secret recipe. Below right: Her daughter, Abby Betts serves up the Best Bacon Cheeseburger in Orange County! Photos by Phil Audibert

Wanda plops one of these babies down on the grill and right beside it she places a handful of this unique all lean no fat shredded bacon. There they sizzle. Then she loads the bacon on top of the burger and only then does she put the cheese on. So what happens is, the cheese melts through the bacon.

Then, she dips a ladleful of that broth and douses the whole thing, smothering it in flavorful juice. Finally, she tops this masterpiece with crunchy lettuce, juicy tomato and cradles it in a huge Kaiser roll. Daughter Abby serves it up smothered in sizzling hot, crispy-on-the-outside fries.

Prepare yourself for a religious experience. You are about to sink your teeth into the juiciest, leanest, biggest best bacon cheeseburger in all of Orange County. And you'd better hurry because the Lunch Box Grill is up for sale. Here's a hint for the new owners whoever you may be: Don't change a thing.

