



★★★
BY DEBORAH L. COHEN

CHAIN REACTION

This is chicken-finger country. Land of the baby backs. Home of the free drink refills. What you've long suspected is true: Indy has more chain restaurants per person than almost any city in the U.S. And while that might make some independents hotter than a plate of jalapeño poppers, chains thrive here because we Hoosiers like what they serve—spectacular consistency. So, turning a haughty back to haute cuisine, we present an investigation into the local franchise phenomenon, along with some tasty sides: our own Dream Sampler of appetizers, a Hall of Fame celebrating the best versions of the chain staples, and a handy chart to keep the franchise juggernaut straight.

Photography by Tony Valainis



It is 7 p.m. on a Tuesday night, and customers are spilling out the front door of Chili's Grill & Bar on East 82nd Street. Inside, surrounded by a seemingly random assortment of knickknacks on the walls, diners flip eagerly through the 11-page menu stacked with burgers, ribs, and chicken. The demographic here is almost as middle-America as the food itself:

families of four, mostly white, middle-class but practical about spending. Almost every one of the 48 tables is occupied.

Nothing distinguishes this particular evening, or this particular restaurant. Traveling east from Keystone Avenue to Knue Road—a distance of less than four miles—a hungry family would have a choice of nearly two dozen casual dining chains, including Applebee's, T.G.I. Friday's, Olive Garden, Red Lobster, Don Pablo's, and The Cheesecake Factory. Even on this unremarkable night in the middle of the week, many of them have a wait. Although this corridor between the Fashion Mall and Castleton remains one of the busiest chain-dining sectors in the city, similar scenes can be found on Shadeland Avenue on the east side, U.S. Highway 31 on the south side, and 38th Street on the west side.

Indianapolis, as you may have noticed, has become chain heaven.

Long characterized as a quintessentially American town, the Circle City is a magnet for casual dining restaurants such as these, as well as for an abundance of other chains at both ends of the dining spectrum. They come here because they are welcomed by a community that values predictable fare, a family-friendly atmosphere, and affordable pricing. They come here in response to the city's rapid suburban growth. They come here because of low taxes, low wages, and a fairly homogenous population. Several of the chains, including O'Charley's and Rock Bottom Brewery, count some of their highest performing locations in Indy.

Much to the continuing chagrin of the city's independent eateries, a snowball effect has taken place. The highly competitive restaurant sector has always been a copycat business. Big restaurant chains, many of them public companies, are hard-pressed to satisfy shareholders with steady earnings growth, so word of a stable market spreads quickly—call it a chain reaction.

"We were one of the first casual dining chains on this street in 1993," says Christian Hershik, a manager at the 82nd

SPINACH-ARTICHOKE DIP



O'Charley's

A must-have starter that sacrifices cream for big, solid chunks of artichoke and fresh spinach. Parmesan shavings arranged on top add a gourmet touch.

Cheesecake Factory

A departure from the gloppy standard, this version has a hint of cheese. Spinach, artichoke, shallots, and garlic dominate the ramekin.

Red Lobster

A bubbling browned crust is testament to its casserole roots. But bits of sweet lobster are stirred into the mix, a signature addition that gives the dish seafood-house cred.

HALL OF FAME

Fried Macaroni and Cheese
The Cheesecake Factory
Crunchy outside, creamy inside, these lightly breaded carb balls are the yin and yang of meal-starters. \$8.50 for four.

Titan Toothpicks
Rock Bottom Brewery
These oversized taquitos are stuffed with juicy smoked chicken, fried crisp, and served with dipping sauces. \$8.99 for four.

Zen Chicken Pot Stickers
T.G.I. Friday's
Asian dumplings stuffed with minced chicken. \$6.99 for six.

DREAM SAMPLER

If we lived in a perfect chain-restaurant world, our appetizer plate would look something like this.

Sicilian Scampi
Olive Garden
Crisp bruschetta forms a sturdy base for Olive Garden's salty, lemony interpretation of scampi. \$9.50 for five.

Big Mouth Bites
Chili's
Mini cheeseburgers topped with applewood-smoked bacon, sauteed onions, and ranch dressing. \$7.29 for four.



"Indianapolis can be seen as a middle city in many ways: middle of the country, middle income, and middle-aged," says one local expert. "Market researchers love us folks who are in the middle."

Street Chili's. "Now there are so many that no one can even hope to stand out. All you can do is push for better service, because new chains will move in and fill every gap."

Today, the greater Indianapolis metropolitan area has one of the highest concentrations of chain restaurants per capita of any market in the U.S., according to data from Asterop Inc., a San Francisco-based provider of research for the retail and restaurant industries. In comparing similar markets, the firm determined that geographic coverage by chain restaurants here was 44 percent higher than the national average.

Asterop counted some 1,160 chain restaurants in greater Indianapolis, including 270 full-service restaurants like Applebee's, 722 fast-food joints, and 168 so-called fast-casual eateries like Qdoba, those that dish up made-to-order food quickly. Of the area's total population (1.7 million), this translates to a ratio of one chain restaurant for every 1,459 people, the highest of any metro area observed in the study.

Indy's propensity for chains runs ahead of even Columbus, Ohio, another capital city considered perfect for the eateries because of its Midwestern sensibility. With a slightly larger population of 1.75 million, the market has some 1,560 diners for each chain restaurant. Residents of Chicago, the third-largest U.S. city, can hardly find an appetizer sampler platter anywhere—at about 2,630 people for every one of its chains, it has barely half our density.

"Chains that execute well and do it consistently are very successful in Indianapolis," says Guy Stanke, vice president of operations for Tennessee-based O'Charley's, which has 13 locations in the Indianapolis area, including three of its 10 best performers. "The economy for restaurants there has been almost bulletproof."



While everyone agrees that the casual dining chains flock here in staggering numbers, industry experts provide a variety of reasons why. One thing that can be said for sure is that it all starts with money and growth. Since 1990, the population of the Indy metro area has increased 31 percent, growing at nearly twice the rate of Chicago and well ahead of Columbus. According to the Indiana Research Center, part of Indiana

University's Kelley School of Business, the city will grow another 23 percent by 2015. The city's median household income of \$50,841 places us slightly above the national average, but not so far up as to require an influx of pricey bistros.

"Indianapolis can be seen as a middle city in many ways: middle of the state, middle of the country, middle income, perhaps even a tad more middle-aged than some others," says Carol O. Rogers, deputy director of the center. "Market researchers and retailers love us folks who are in the middle—we might be seen as 'everyone' in terms of tastes and lifestyle."

In addition to that "middle" reputation, suburban sprawl has contributed to the city's chain concentration. With miles of flat prairie land, the greater Indianapolis metropolitan area, encompassing some 3,860 square miles, has been an easy target for suburban malls and strip malls dating back several decades. It doesn't hurt that Simon Property Group, the world's largest builder of shopping malls, is headquartered here. Chains, which are well-capitalized and can meet the building requirements of malls that frequently call for restaurants with several hundred seats, are typically given preferential treatment.



BATTERED ONION



Outback Steakhouse (Bloomin' Onion)

Outback invented the heavily battered appetizer in 1988. Now it's the first (and most popular) item on the menu.

Red Robin (Towering Onion Rings)

A baker's dozen of breaded and seasoned rings, stacked in ascending order on a metal rod, make up this Eiffel Tower of fried bangles.

Texas Roadhouse (Cactus Blossom)

The Cactus Blossom is more battered than onion, but if you like your appetizers to have a spicy kick (the Cajun-inspired dipping sauce brings the heat), this dish, available in two sizes, packs the appropriate pre-meal punch.

HALL OF FAME

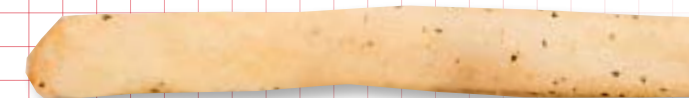
FRIED & TRUE

French fries demand serious consideration. Our expert panel of tasters ranks the chain contenders.*

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



^ RUBY TUESDAY | *Crisp and peppery, a noble frite with attitude ***



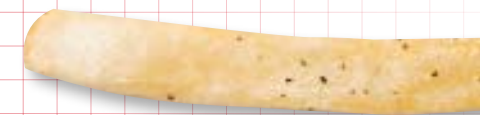
^ CHILI'S | *Brilliantly sprinkled with parsley and garlic*



^ O'CHARLEY'S | *A thick, well-seasoned, streamlined beauty*



^ OUTBACK STEAKHOUSE | *Admirable girth, but under-salted and soft in the middle*



^ T.G.I. FRIDAY'S | *Slender to a fault, with no flavor to speak of*



^ ALCATRAZ BREWING CO. | *Greasy and hard, with only a suggestion of pepper seasoning*



^ THE CHEESECAKE FACTORY | *Bland and nearly hollow inside a too-crisp exterior*



^ APPLEBEE'S | *Dry and starchy, with a freezer-burn aftertaste*

* Actual fries depicted here.
** Please pass the ketchup.

★THE CHAIN GANG★

Love them or hate them, chain restaurants will always have a place at our dinner table. Here's a quick guide to the good, the bad, and the irresistible.



	APPLEBEE'S	CHEESEBURGER IN PARADISE	CHEESECAKE FACTORY	CHILI'S	CRACKER BARREL	O'CHARLEY'S	OLIVE GARDEN	OUTBACK STEAKHOUSE		RED LOBSTER	RED ROBIN	TEXAS ROADHOUSE	T.G.I. FRIDAY'S
CATCHPHRASE	<i>Eatin' Good in the Neighborhood</i>	<i>Escape to Paradise</i>	<i>Something for Everyone</i>	<i>Pepper in Some Fun</i>	<i>Half Restaurant. Half Store. All Country.</i>	<i>Good Food, Good Times</i>	<i>When You're Here, You're Family</i>	<i>No Rules, Just Right</i>		<i>Come See What's Fresh Today</i>	<i>Where Burger Lovers Unite</i>	<i>Legendary Food, Legendary Service</i>	<i>In Here, It's Always Friday</i>
SCENE	Everyman's sports bar	Margaritaville	McMansion	Golf clubhouse	Front-porch country kitsch	Fern bar	Planet Italy	Boomerangs and kangaroos		Shabby (nautical) chic	Space-age diner	Rugged and knotholed	Rummage sale
INDY-AREA LOCATIONS	18	2	2	9	7	6	5	5		5	2	3	7
SURETHING	Riblets: easy-to-manage square-boned slabs dripping with thick, sweet sauce	El Cubano: the traditional pressed sandwich, loaded with ham, salami, pork, cheese, mayo, mustard, and pickles	Roasted Pear and Endive Salad: with grilled chicken, bleu cheese, tomatoes, and candied pecans	Quesadilla Explosion: lettuce piled with chicken, corn relish, and tomato, garnished with quesadilla wedges	The Cracker Barrel Sampler: chicken n' dumplings, meatloaf, and your choice of country or sugar-cured ham	Black & Bleu Caesar Salad: topped with blackened medium-rare sirloin, bacon, and crumbled bleu cheese	Chicken & Gnocchi Veronese: delicate potato dumplings and sauteed chicken in a ricotta cream sauce	Alice Springs Chicken: grilled and layered with bacon, honey mustard, and mushrooms, all under a cap of melted cheese		Garlic-grilled Jumbo Shrimp: two skewers of plump marinated crustaceans, perfectly grilled	Grilled Turkey Burger: downright juicy, and seasoned with a little kick	Ribs: Fork-tender pork with a hint of smoke in vinegary-sweet sauce	Sesame Jack Chicken Strips: fried chicken pieces in a syrupy Jack Daniel's sauce, rolled in toasted sesame seeds
BIGSELLER	California Shrimp Salad	Mini Cheeseburgers	Bang-Bang Chicken and Shrimp	Chicken Crispers	Chicken n' Dumplings	Southern Fried Chicken Salad	Chicken Alfredo	Center-cut sirloin		King crab legs	Whiskey River BBQ Burger	6-ounce sirloin	Jack Daniel's Chicken & Shrimp
ULTIMATE UMBRELLA DRINK	Applebee's Mudslide: ice cream, Kahlua, and chocolate syrup	Cheeseburger in Paradise Cocktail: frozen layers of various cocktails, with fruit, juices, and Blue Curacao	Flying Gorilla: ice cream, bananas, chocolate syrup, creme de cacao, and banana liqueur	Tropical Sunrise Margarita: colored with melon liqueur and grenadine	Frozen Mug Apple Cider: the name pretty much says it all	Wabo-rita: classic margarita with green salt on the rim	Limoncello Lemonade: frozen lemonade, citrus vodka, limoncello liqueur, sugared rim	Pineapple Chipotle Margarita: margarita with pineapple chunks and pineapple-chipotle syrup		Sunset Passion Colada: frozen piña colada topped with strawberry sauce	Sand in Your Shorts: Chambord, vodka, peach schnapps, Midori, triple sec, orange and cranberry juices, sour mix	Armadillo Punch: orange, pineapple, and cranberry juices, with a splash of Malibu rum	Ultimate Mango Mai Tai: Captain Morgan and Malibu rums with fresh tropical juices



Eateries such as The Cheesecake Factory at the Fashion Mall sometimes even fill the role of anchor—once exclusively reserved for department stores. “They have a big balance sheet behind them, and they can stand behind the lease in good times and bad,” says Steve Delaney, a real-estate broker based in Indy who has helped scout locations for Olive Garden and Red Lobster. “A developer likes to see the budget of national restaurant chains. That enhances the entire project.”

What's more, the city's restaurant economy seems somewhat immune to the slowdown that has plagued other Midwest cities such as Detroit. Although real-estate sources at several chains say sales in Indy have softened somewhat along with the broader industry, unlike in some other markets, there have been few closings here. “We're the shiny buckle in the Rust Belt,” says Roland Dorson, president of the Greater Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce. “We've grown in population while other communities in the Midwest are shrinking. You're talking about a more-prosperous city than some of our counterpart cities. As goes population growth, so go retailers.”

There are more subtle factors working in favor of the chains as well. Central Indiana has a long history as an experimental market for corporate businesses of every stripe, serving as a litmus test for

*As determined by *Men's Health*, for its 2,900 calories and 182 grams of fat.



HOUSE SALAD

The Cheesecake Factory
It's easy to overlook a simply described "tossed green salad" in a book-sized menu, but this one goes beyond simplicity, with cucumber strings, chopped beets, and chunks of fresh zucchini.

Cheeseburger in Paradise
Piled with cucumbers, crunchy wontons, and steamed asparagus, it's well worth the extra \$2.29 with your entree. Not paradise, but close.

Olive Garden
Served in a big glass bowl with metal tongs, this family-style salad stands out as an icon among pre-meal roughage, even though there's nothing unusual about the ingredients. Maybe we just appreciate the free refills.



everything from new store formats for Sears to McDonald's prototype McCafe restaurant. "We're a good test market to see if something is going to work across the country," says John Livengood, president of the Indiana Restaurant Association.

"We're very affordable, and we have a propensity to eat out quite a bit. We're an especially good place to do that."

Taxes and wages also play a part in the success of chain restaurants. The state has managed to keep its minimum wage close to the \$5.85-an-hour threshold set by the federal government, which attracts dining establishments that might balk at setting up shop in California, where it's \$8. Indiana also has a tip credit, allowing restaurants to pay waitstaff and others earning gratuities a rate of \$2.13 an hour, letting their tips make up the balance of the hourly minimum. And so far, our city has declined to levy a high restaurant tax as some others have.

Then there's a more delicate factor to consider,

one that addresses the development of our rather bland palate. While Indy has a growing immigrant population, on the whole the community remains somewhat homogenous, with people of German and Irish descent still making up the bulk of Marion County's residents. That sameness may account for a lack of well-defined ethnic neighborhoods akin to Chicago's Greektown or New York's Little Italy, communities that bred long-standing independent mom-and-pop restaurants with fiercely loyal clientele. Which, in turn, may account for the almost embarrassing number of chains here.

Says Livengood: "It's just a very Waspish, typically American, white middle-class town."

Perhaps no one understands the pros and cons of running chain restaurants in Indy quite as well as Mike DeWeese. In 1996, disillusioned with corporate life as a district sales manager for a Coca-Cola bottler, DeWeese, then 27, raised \$475,000, including \$25,000 in franchise fees, to open his first Buffalo Wild Wings Grill & Bar (then called BW-3) north of the city. "It was a pretty simple concept, which is why I think it did well," he says. Anchored by

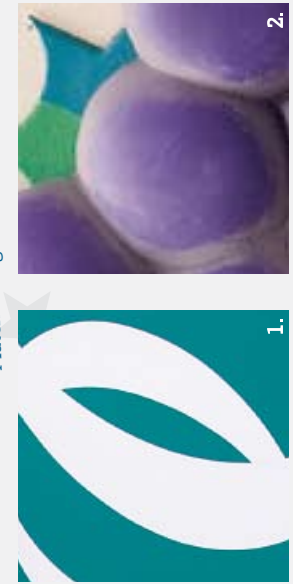
WILLIE NELSON PHOTO COURTESY TEXAS ROADHOUSE; GUY FIERI PHOTO BY ALEJANDRO R. TORRES, SOUND IDEAS ADVERTISING; JOHN MADDEN, WANDA SYKES, TYLER FLORENCE & JEMAINIE CLEMENT PHOTOS COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION, INC.

CHAIN TEAZER

How well do you know your chain restaurants? Take this quiz to find out.

I SAW THE SIGN

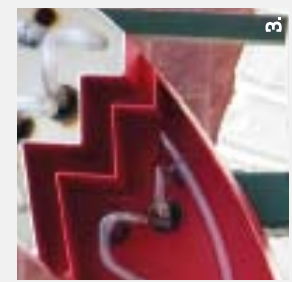
Match the sign with the corresponding restaurant.



1.



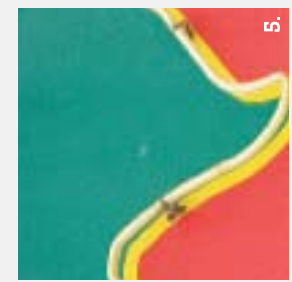
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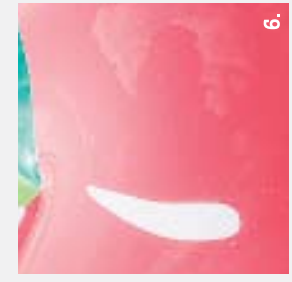
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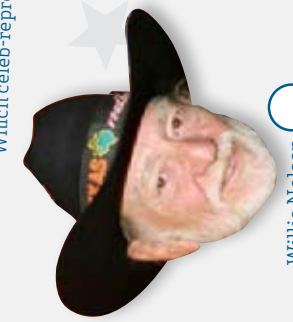
5.



6.

HEAD GAME

Which celeb-representative pitched which chain?



Willie Nelson



John Madden



Guy Fieri



Wanda Sykes



Tyler Florence



Jemaine Clement

a. Chili's b. T.G.I. Friday's c. Texas Roadhouse d. Outback e. Applebee's f. Ruby Tuesday

U CHOOSE

- Which local independent restaurant began as a chain concept?
 - Peterson's
 - Loon Lake Lodge
 - Bazbeaux Pizza
 - Rick's Cafe Booyard
 - Plump's Last Shot
- Which chain restaurant was launched in 1972?
 - Max & Erma's
 - Ruby Tuesday
 - Houlihan's
 - All of the above
- Which of the following is not an item on the children's menu at Outback Steakhouse?
 - Kookaburra Chicken Fingers
 - Boomerang Cheese Burger
 - Mac-A-Roo 'N Cheese
 - Spotted Dog Sundae
 - Barbie's Malibu Shrimp

ANSWERS

I Saw The Sign: 1.f, 2.b, 3.a, 4.d, 5.e, 6.c. Head Game: Willie, c, Madden, d, Guy, b, Wanda, e, Tyler, e, Jemaine, d, U Choose: 1.d, 2.b, 3.e

a. Chili's b. Olive Garden c. Applebee's d. T.G.I. Friday's e. Texas Roadhouse f. O'Charley's

Walk into an Applebee's or Outback Steakhouse today and you'll find a menu and decor that look very similar to the ones you remember from the 1980s. The tchotchkes on the wall haven't changed. The sauces haven't changed.

BURGER

strong bar sales, the 5,600-square-foot restaurant raked in close to \$1.5 million in yearly revenue and more than \$150,000 in profit. It gave patrons the option of ordering meals at the counter for a quicker bite or takeout. After two years, DeWeese—one of 10 original franchisees—took a bet that a site at 15 E. Maryland St. in downtown Indy would lure Pacers crowds from the soon-to-be-constructed Conseco Fieldhouse. Sales built momentum as downtown expanded, and DeWeese later added locations in Greenwood and Plainfield.

A newcomer to restaurant management, he says he was enthusiastic about the national advertising and other support that comes from being part of a system; DeWeese was even 1999 franchisee of the year. The Minneapolis-based company's kitchen protocol—simple pub grub with spicy sauces—wasn't difficult to master. "The most challenging things we were doing were grilling chicken breasts and burgers," he says. As a family man, however, he got tired of running around

to multiple sites and sold off all but the downtown location in 2002. There his creative side blossomed at the restaurant bar, where DeWeese's inklings of becoming an independent operator were taking root. He became a local beer guru of sorts, scoping out unusual microbrews and displaying his knowledge on local beer Web sites.

As Buffalo Wild Wings grew larger (today it has more than 500 locations, and its stock trades on Nasdaq), the company took an increasingly hands-on approach to operations, including DeWeese's franchise location. The chain brokered deals with national and local brewers and dictated which brands of beer would flow from the taps. "That's when we started to butt heads a bit," he says. "Go to any Buffalo Wild Wings in the country and you're going to find anywhere from 25 to 30 beers, but you're going to find very little unique or interesting beer." Ironically, he thinks his stance on the issue may have cost him some business with his customers seeking the BW-3 experience. "They were expecting us to be like all the other locations," he says. The chain's unwillingness to update the quality on a menu he characterizes as frozen and processed food added to the list of reasons DeWeese decided to let his franchise agreement lapse last year.

After a decade in the market,

DeWeese should have known better. In July 2007, in the same location, he invested another \$250,000 to open Badaboomz, a casual eatery with ample beers and affordable food. He offered 10 different burgers, signature pizzas, and wraps. He smoked his own turkeys and salmon, and hand-battered the onion rings. But in the heart of the city's sports district, where customers long for the familiar, Badaboomz was an oddball. The only week DeWeese made money was during the Big Ten tournament. On May 14, 10 months after opening, he closed up shop. "We just never got accepted because we were not a recognizable chain name," says DeWeese, who now serves as president of the Downtown Restaurant Association. "People here like the major familiar brands. We don't take a lot of chances."

Today the location has once again been transformed, this time into J. Gumbo's, a budding Cajun-style concept out of Louisville, Kentucky. DeWeese feels it is a good compromise—an early-stage chain with menu offerings he respects and veteran operators who, for now, are giving him some space. "I learned my lesson," he says. "I think this is something I can grow in Indianapolis."

And while foodies and families alike may lament the shortage of independent eateries in Indianapolis, there is no denying our penchant for the dependable fare of the casual dining chains. Even as the

new "fast casual" Qdoba's and high-end Palominos of the world crowd our already saturated market, the mid-level chains continue to succeed here

without changing much at all. Walk into an Applebee's or Outback Steakhouse today and you'll find a menu and decor that look very similar to the ones you remember from the 1980s. The tchotchkes on the wall haven't changed. The sauces haven't changed. The ideal locations haven't changed. Perhaps the only difference is that there are more of them.

"The way to grow a brand is not to offer a baked potato just because someone notices it's not on the menu and happens to want one," says Hershik, the 82nd Street Chili's manager. "What happens if that person then goes to one of our restaurants in Florida and wants a baked potato there? The customer has to know what to expect—people find comfort in reliability, especially in Indianapolis. If you want to be successful here, you keep everything exactly the same."



BABY BACK RIBS

1 Outback Steakhouse

Outback does a lot of things right, which could explain why these deliciously sloppy, fall-off-the-bone ribs get overlooked. Trust us: steak your claim to a rack next time you visit.

2 Chili's

Ribs so good they inspired a song and are now offered in six flavors. I want my baby back, baby back ... Dang! There we go again.

3 Texas Roadhouse

Fork-tender and dusted with a savory dry rub, these ribs come with a vinegary sauce, setting them apart from traditional chain racks. And like all things aspiring to be Texan, they're big.

HALL OF FAME

1 Alcatraz Brewing Co.

Served on a bun grilled on both sides, this juicy hand-pattied Angus Cheeseburger is wider than it is tall, making it easier to eat than a stacked burger. Suitable for a last meal in prison.

2 Ruby Tuesday

A patty of USDA Choice beef with light seasoning that brings out the flavor of the meat but doesn't overwhelm it. A gem of a burger on Tuesday or any other day of the week.

3 Cheeseburger in Paradise

American cheese on a perfectly seasoned ground-beef patty—a straightforward classic. We like ours with lettuce and tomato, Heinz 57, and ... okay, we swore we weren't going to sing.

HALL OF FAME

