TALLULAH BURGER PHOTO BY DAVE HANSEN

BIG MEAT

DANIEL COMBS SEARCHES FOR BURGER BLISS IN NEWPORT. AND HE USES A LOT OF NAPKINS.

<<< TALLULAH BURGER

Tallulah on Thames, 464 Thames St., Newport | (401) 849-2433
www.tallulahonthames.com

Price: $15

Tallulah's eponymous burger is a treat for the locals in more ways than one. During the fall, winter and spring it's offered every Wednesday evening as a way to bring their exquisite tasting food down to a more manageable price range. In doing so, they've honored the people of Newport with the most absurdly delicious creation in the city. It's poetic in a way, because Tallulah's mission is not just to deliver scrumptiousness, but also to honor the food and farms of the local community. This burger is proof of that, made from 100% black Angus beef from Smithfield's Blackbird Farms. Its construction is tectonic without being titanic. The bun, called a pocket bun, is a thin, square creation that hides textural depth within its voluminous, flaky pockets and doughy holes. The cheese is not so much a cheese as a perfect sauce; a house-made blue cheese aioli that sits underneath the burger, packing a pungent yet tempered wallop of taste that drools down the sides of your lips as you sink in. The rich creaminess is countered by the toppings; braised red onions lend an earthy sweetness while the small crop of bitter arugula tossed in a silky lemon vinaigrette cleanses your palate. A warning: The Tallulah Burger is impossible to eat without a pile of napkins at hand. Enjoy every minute of it while you can this summer, when Tallulah will offer the burger once a month, broadcasting the date on their Twitter feed.

MOST HEART-STOPPING

THE CARDIAC DOUBLE BACON CHEESEBURGER >>>

Brick Alley Pub, 140 Thames St., Newport | (401) 849-6334 | www.brickalley.com

Price: $13.95

The Cardiac Burger is arresting. Its spongy bulky roll can barely contain two half-pound patties glued together and topped with American cheese, then covered with two thick pieces of bacon and a small mountain of sweet, caramelized onions. Leafy lettuce and ripe tomatoes on top hint at something that could be considered healthy. When you're craving a no-holds-barred, screw-what-your-doctor-says celebration of meat on bun, the Brick Alley Pub gives you what you want to the highest enjoyable extreme. This isn't a burger for the faint of heart and its sheer amount of fat and grease might not make it a universally appealing choice, but if you want to sleep through dinner in a food coma, order this for lunch.

CARDIAC DOUBLE BACON CHEESEBURGER PHOTO BY JACQUELINE MARQUE

They come unadorned: the simple pleasure of a hand-formed beef patty nestled between two pieces of bread. They come blinged out — piled high with artisan cheeses, specialty house-made sauces and thick-cut bacon. Should the bun be toasted or not? Depends if you want it to provide soakability or texture. Cheese? Some swear by it, others against. Others insist on a pile of greens and vegetables — a crisp bite to cut through the mound of blood and fat below.

Over the past few weeks, I set out to find the best burgers in Newport. At the start of the quest, there were no parameters other than the simple "better is better." But as the list of burgers grew, I began to realize that even if I had four weeks to work with, there wouldn't be enough room to do justice to every good burger in the city. I was forced to satisfy a particular niche, a decision brought about with the hard-won knowledge that one of the immortal appeals of the burger is its undeniable decadence.

This isn't to say every burger is fancy, but that the category "burger" exists in a class by itself. A burger craving cannot be filled by any other food, no matter how filling, well prepared or exotic it is. Fulfilling the need for a burger tickles you in a special way, and that feeling, that first bite, that moment is pure decadence.

Ketchup became a sticking point, a bellwether to determine overall quality. The need for ketchup signifies lack of juiciness, an absence of meaty flavor.

Conversely, messy, undignified eating generally hinted toward burger distinction. I found the best burgers tended to be wet affairs, beauties upon first glance that were quick to show their dirty side, spilling their inner secrets across a white plate. It wasn't uncommon for me to end up licking my fingers at high-end establishments, savoring the meaty liquid that had run down the edges of a saturated bun.

This act is not to be avoided, but treasured. To see a fellow patron licking his or her fingers in a post-burger high is to know you can trust the chef.

RATING SYSTEM

🍔 : Send it back
🍔🍔 : Pass the ketchup
🍔🍔🍔 : Happy medium
🍔🍔🍔🍔 : Pity the vegetarians!
🍔🍔🍔🍔🍔 : God would order this

⌄ CHRISTIE'S BURGER ⌄

Christie's, 351 Thames St., Newport (401) 847-5400 | www.41north.com/dining-christies.aspx

Price: $11

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On first glance, the menu description of Christie's namesake burger doesn't seem at all special: provolone, tomato jam, with fries and onion rings. So what's it doing on this list? Its arrival to your table proves that simplicity, when executed perfectly, is all the luxury you need. The perfectly sized burger is smothered with a flawless layer of contour-nuzzling white provolone cheese, whose subtly smoky flavor is a sudden and welcome addition. But the highlight, what you should be concentrating on, is the pile of red jam sitting proudly atop the cheese, a finespun hillock of red contrasted against its brilliant white background. The jam is not a ketchup; it can hardly be considered a condiment. It doesn't mask any flavors, it doesn't soak into the toasted crust of the sweet brioche bun. It maintains the texture and bite of a fresh tomato while injecting a cinnamon-y sweet tinge of an aftertaste. Somehow this red extract is the gossamer web that holds this perfectly sized sandwich together. Savor every bite, and don't forget the house-made pickles, which offer a perfectly slight palate cleanser.

THE GQ BURGER ⌄

The Spiced Pear at The Chanler, 117 Memorial Blvd., Newport | (401) 847-1300 | www.thechanler.com/dining

Price: $26

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Back in 2006, GQ's chief food writer, Alan Richman, authored a piece titled "The 20 Hamburgers You Must Eat Before You Die." He traveled more than 23,000 miles across America in order to make his list. The Spiced Pear's burger came in at No. 3. Since then, it's been re-titled the "GQ Burger," and it is by far the most popular menu item. It's a burger that isn't — a high-end fusion concept that you eat with your hands. The patty cannot be called

GQ BURGER PHOTO BY JACQUELINE MARQUE

short I'm. The meat melts in your mouth like you would expect a pulled pork sandwich to. It releases meaty, beefy juices in quantities that border on disbelief. The bun at first seems too large, as though it would overwhelm the contents within. But the sweet brioche collapses into itself, providing the perfect grip for shoveling dripping bits of meat into your mouth. The melting meat is topped with a white Vermont cheddar cheese along with tomato-onion jam and curried coleslaw. The tomato jam makes a weird kind of sense, a hybrid between fresh tomatoes and the molasses-y sauce of barbecued pork. It's perfectly at home with the kobe. The slaw is harder to understand. It's a dry slaw, there almost more to provide a textural contrast than a taste. But the taste is there — exotic — hidden within the crunchy cabbage. If you can justify paying the tab, it's worth every penny.

CHRISTIE'S BURGER PHOTO BY JACQUELINE MARQUE