



Liz Biro: You could eat this burger every day

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Quaff ON! Bloomington's healthier beef/mushroom patty holds 1st place in national contest



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Doll up my chicken. Go nuts on sandwiches. Change everything about pizza if you want, but please keep my burgers all beef.

That said, when Quaff ON! Bloomington chef Dan Nichols said he served the best part beef/part mushroom burger in America, I covered my wince with excessive enthusiasm.

Nichols' Triple B Burger is by far the leader in the [James Beard Foundation's](#) national [Better Burger Project](#) contest. The New York City-based James Beard Foundation showcases American regional cuisine. The burger competition challenges chefs to create healthier burgers by substituting ground mushrooms for part of the meat. A half mushroom, half beef burger packs 149 calories as opposed to 307 calories in an all-beef burger, Beard Foundation reports.

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The public votes for their favorites on Instagram by posting a photo of the burger they choose with the hashtag #BetterBurgerProject. Quaff ON!'s burger had 192 votes July 22, edging out [Bachi Burger](#), deemed one of [Las Vegas' best restaurants](#) by Travel + Leisure magazine. Voting ends July 31. Two other area restaurants, [Local Eatery & Pub](#) in Westfield and [FARMBloomington](#) in Bloomington are in the running, too.

Local Eatery & Pub's Better Burger Project contender features smoked gouda, shiitake and local oyster mushrooms, mushroom mostarda, local greens and heirloom tomatoes and Local Folks mustard aioli. (Photo: Local Eatery & Pub)

Despite the tally, I walked into Quaff ON! wearing a chip on my shoulder. The restaurant's 25 percent chuck, 25 percent short rib and 50 percent sirloin burger is supplemented with crimini mushrooms, porcini mushroom powder, pimentos and roasted green chiles.

What a thing to do to all that lovely, local Heartland Farms beef, right?

Triple B arrived all tall and nicely charred, savory brown juices dripping and issuing a divine aroma. It was piled with arugula, sliced tomatoes, caramelized onions, local [Tulip Tree Creamery's](#) Trillium triple cream brie and mustard made with Quaff ON! Brewery's Six Foot Blond beer, all on a brioche.

I usually order burgers medium-rare, but I thought why bother. I mean, how do you medium-rare a mushroom? I requested medium with my fingers crossed. When I cut the burger in half, it was just right, sporting an ever-so-slight touch of pink.



FARMBloomington restaurant in Bloomington is competing in the Better Burger Project contest, too. There, chef Bob Adkins' Magical Mushroom Tour Burger features grass-fed beef, local mushrooms, miso aioli, cucumber salad and kimchi (Photo: FARMBloomington)

The first bite was juicy, tender and as satisfying as any burger I've had, but yes, it was different. The texture was softer. The noticeable mushroom flavor reminded me of some vegetarian burgers I've eaten. The taste of the beef might have sat back, but Nichols pushed it forward with the char, a little demi-glace and

caramelized onions.

Hearty and filling, the Triple B won me. I ate half, packed the other half and devoured it cold from the refrigerator for breakfast the next day. It was just as good.

"I've heard our (service) team tell guests it's like a burger only better, that it just melts in your mouth. That you hardly even chew it. And they have a pretty good feel for it; they all order them for shift meal almost every day," Nichols said.

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The chef put a lot of thought into that burger, 13 test batches to be exact.

Nichols analyzed a particular flavor profile. Minced mushrooms provided [umami](#). Roasted green chiles added a slight sour and spice. Roasted pimentos and the Quaff ON! Busted Knuckle Porter beer in which Nichols sautéed the mushrooms supplied sweetness. The herb and beef stock blend [Zip Sauce](#) added herbaceous hints. No salt goes into the burger.

Quaff ON! Bloomington chef Dan Nichols is by far the leader in the James Beard Foundation's national Better Burger Project contest. (Photo: Quaff ON! Bloomington)

Binding the burger was a challenge. "I did not want the burger to have a meatloaf style texture so I stayed away from eggs or breadcrumbs," Nichols said. "Instead, I sourced porcini mushroom powder to further impart the umami flavor and absorb the liquid."

Nichols was as thoughtful about toppings: tomatoes for freshness, arugula for a little bitter, peppery flavor, demi glacé for buttery richness, beer mustard for spiciness and caramelized onions for a slightly burned caramel flavor. Triple cream brie lends saltiness. Plus, Nichols knew the cheese would melt and saturate the slightly sweet, eggy brioche.

“I think the most important part of this burger is the beef and mushroom blend which can easily be accomplished,” Nichols advised home cooks. “I would recommend cooking it in a cast iron skillet as it’s easier to flip it without coming apart. As for the rest of it, any combination of ingredients you like using sweet, savory, spicy and salty will make for a well-balanced, tasty burger.”

Although the Beard Better Burger Project shows Quaff ON! Bloomington scoring 192 votes, 1,007 Triple B Burgers have been sold to date. As a result, Nichols is developing a chicken version combining breast, thigh, heart and gizzard with mushroom, roasted pepper and artichoke hearts to appeal to those who don’t eat red meat. Both burgers will be on Quaff ON!’s next menu release.

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