

Burger 9 Point 5

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Burger 9 Point 5 in Merrick offers The Jagger, a burger with marinated mushrooms and caramelized onions. (Sept. 3, 2009) (Credit: Kirsten Luce)

Adam Goldgell is a chef with big ideas and culinary skills to match. At Burger 9 Point 5, he turns out an inspired array of burgers (beef, lamb, bison, vegetable, turkey and Kobe beef), grinding the meat himself and even baking the irresistible egg-glossed brioche rolls they're tucked into. What Goldgell and his partners seem at a loss to do, at least for now, is efficiently run a restaurant.

Here's my laundry list of what this offbeat little sit-down eatery needs: better heating, a heavy curtain or makeshift vestibule to block out frigid gusts, a menu that's easy to comprehend and a team of cheerful, professional servers.

Ultimately, though, I found it worth braving the cold and, one night in particular, a waitress' chilly carelessness, to savor Goldgell's homage to simple American favorites. And I'm confident things will get better on the operational end.

His roster of soups changes daily. On my first visit, when service was genial, the meal started with a soup "sampler" - five small glasses, one containing chili, the others, respectively, filled with carrot-ginger, creamy wild mushroom, lentil-ham and tomato-rice soups. All were full-flavored and vibrant.

The second time around, I was less impressed with the bland chicken noodle and broccoli-cheese soups but thought the thick pumpkin-hazelnut soup pleasingly rich, if a bit sweet. We ordered an appetizer called a "zop" - a platter of fried zucchini, onions and potatoes. Goldgell sent word that he was out of zucchini, so the onions and French fries would be gratis.

Both were showstoppers, the delicate shards of batter-fried onion shatteringly crisp, the slivered skin-on potatoes (fried in a combination of duck fat and peanut oil) addictive.

On my initial visit, a beef burger with a topping named the Jagger (caramelized mushrooms and onions) arrived overcooked and had to be sent back. It was ideal the second time around, as was its meltingly savory topping. On another evening, a friend's beef burger, with a topping called the Samantha (melted Gruyère and ham) was faultless from the start. A spiced lamb burger paired well with the exotic korma topping of mixed vegetables in a compelling sauce with Middle Eastern spices.

On a Kobe beef burger, I sampled a topping called the Adam 303 (named in honor of the chef's most recent cholesterol count) consisting of seared foie gras and caramelized onion. It was just one of several ways Goldgell has devised to sabotage diets. My preference, oddly enough, was for his turkey burger. Goldgell grinds white and dark meat together to form this juicy, two-tone mixture. It went well with a sautéed teriyaki vegetable topping that, mysteriously, is no longer on the menu. A fine bison burger (fairly low in fat and calories) was a fiery, juicy zinger when crowned with the Harrison topping - chipotle, hot Cajun spices and melted mozzarella.

Although a friend ordered a house-made garden burger (a chunky fresh vegetable blend) with the Jorge mixture of guacamole, roasted tomato and cilantro butter, he was, instead, given mushrooms. "The chef is out of the Jorge," was the only explanation for the substitution.

Goldgell offers alternatives to ground meat, poultry and vegetables. A pan-seared chicken-breast sandwich, the Philly topping (thick slabs of fresh mozzarella, roasted peppers and caramelized onions) was a surprising success. The menu also features a filet mignon and butter-poached lobster, if that's what you want to bother with in a burger joint.

On a night when ours was the only table occupied, Goldgell brought out a dessert of palachinkas (Hungarian crepes) filled with raspberry and apricot jam, crowned with freshly whipped cream, as well as soft and chunky chocolate-chip cookies. The next time, when we ordered crepes (described on the menu as having four fillings), we got three rolled pancakes, each filled with the same amber-colored jam.

A menu item that truly lived up to its name, though, was "real good hot chocolate." It was rich and sweet, enveloping the face in a cloud of steam. On that wintry night, it was as close as I got to proper heating.