

REVIEW

Burger Star rocks at last

■ **The Omaha company has worked hard to fine-tune its quick-casual bistro concept in the last year.**

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This time last year, the new Burger Star had a rockin' look — framed Rolling Stone covers, music videos, guitars mounted high, and a zip line that whipped orders to the kitchen.

But it didn't have the licks.

In a review last May, I suggested that the then-three-month-old restaurant, an independent concept from a chain restaurant veteran, needed to work on its headliners: the burgers and fries.

After three recent visits, all I can say is someone must have been practicing. A lot.

Burgers were cravably good, fries were fresh and sides were flavorful. Order takers and food runners were more engaged. And Burger Star appeared to have found its groove.

Improvement was most noticeable in the burgers.

Owner Greg Cutchall said he scrapped the 4-ounce machine-pattied ground chuck he'd started with, substituting 6-ounce hand-pattied 80 percent lean ground Angus. The cooked-when-you-order result is a flavorful, juicy, lacy-edged burger that seeps its goodness into a toasted bun.

The fresh kaiser buns, though, defected. They had been my favorite part of the old burger. Cutchall said Burger Star's demand was an undue strain on Paradise Bakery, its sister restaurant and bun supplier. He's switched to Rotella's buns, and he said he is still tweaking that recipe. The new bun isn't a standout, but perhaps that's because a better burger rightfully upstages it.

The fries, too, have come a long way.

Cutchall said he replaced the old Joey's Seafood fryers (left in the building when he leased the space) with auto-draining, programmable, computerized fryers that take out some of the guesswork and potential for human error. And he has tweaked everything from the soaking and blanching time to the type of potato and the size of the cut to get a more consistent, fresh french fry.

The result: Fries on two of three recent visits were perfectly crisp and browned batons, with the occasional bit of peel. They were free of excess grease and any fishy old-oil taste. Only once, during a very busy lunch, did I hit a soggy fry or two.

The previously off-putting creamy coleslaw seemed to have found the appropriate sweet-sour tang, and chili was tremendously meaty and more carefully seasoned than last year's version. Shakes were rich and tasty. The soft tacos — cheeseburger, chicken or fish — remained good, although messy to eat.

And I was glad to see that the burgers were no longer just slopped together. Toppings were assembled just as we'd asked (lots of pickles, a little lettuce, easy on the mayo) on the do-it-yourself ticket. Other menu changes were few: Burger Star has dropped the triple burger (a double now contains the same amount of meat) and swapped in a grilled chicken sandwich. It also has added onion rings with crisp A&W-style crystalline coats and put pepperjack cheese on its list of five burger toppings you can have for a small extra charge and 18 you can have for free.

We appreciated the free Guitar Hero game Cutchall added to one side of the central fireplace. It seemed to minimize the wait for old and young alike — and occupy a fair number of otherwise rambunctious kids while their parents ate.

One other thing that's really noticeable: Each table now sports comment cards that invite feedback and signal that every order matters.

I saw a lot of people filling them out. And I think they improved service. When I ordered a shake with a meal, I was thoughtfully offered a glass of water at the counter — before I could sit down and realize I wanted one. Order-runners seemed to connect a little more, matching the name on the ticket to the face at the table. And, on two of three visits, they came back to see if we needed anything and to clear away our burger baskets.

Quibbles this time were few: Though the music was mostly cool, the rock concert DVDs sometimes get tiresome. Even if you love the Red Hot Chili Peppers, a live drum solo is torturous to hear at dinner.

And it's hard to notice new options on the wipe board when you're filling out a ticket that doesn't list them. (I might have tried a veggie burger they were piloting, for example, or guacamole as an additional topping option, if I'd spotted them before I'd gone to the counter to pay.) You still have to write your own order and get your own beverage. You still have to wait a few minutes — or even a few songs— to get your meal. And you'll pay a tick more for the new, bigger burger — about \$8 to \$12 with a side and a drink.

But the burger and fries now seem worth your modest investment.

And that truly rocks.