

## **Chuck Change: Searching for the Best Burger Bag in Portland**

By Jackson Berkley

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It's high summer in Portland. You have an afternoon to kill, a nagging hunger and a \$10 bill. The city and its vast topography of food carts and pop-ups is your oyster – or taco, or gyro, or 2-slice-and-a-Rainier happy hour special.

But you're feeling patriotic, and only a good ol' cheeseburger will do – not a measly *slider* – with fries wrapped up in a grease-spotted sack, a cold bubbly cup of syrup in the other hand, and some change in your pocket.

You need a burger bag, baby. So where do you go?

While Portland is chuck-full of trendy, creative patty-stackers, the gourmet route can be costly. And it's difficult to find venues outside of the fast food circuit where you can slap that 10 down and walk away with America's greatest synthesis of food and freedom.

With the criterion of a \$10 combo in mind – and some help from Yelp and Reddit – I set out to find the best budget burger bags in the city. This short list is the product of research that was perhaps more exhausting than exhaustive, as it involved eating a cheeseburger every day after work for two weeks. If someone could go write a column on the best budget gym deals in Portland, that would be terrific.

### **Bonnie's Burger & Teriyaki**

*NW 21st Ave. & Marshall St.*

This little diner is tucked behind an Astro gas station in the otherwise shi shi Alphabet District. Discrete and blue collar, it is the essence of burger bag: drive up, walk in, place your order, fill your tank, drive off. The nice woman behind the counter will politely inform you that the napkins are at the bottom of the bag, under the fries. She's done this many, many times.

Or you could stay a while. The small seating area is sparse but cute, with a line of stools facing out towards the street and each table dressed with a big bottle of Sriracha instead of the typical ketchup and mustard. I didn't get a chance to sample the Asian half of the menu, but I embrace most forms of fusion, especially between two cultures of cheap, greasy food.

I went for the double cheeseburger bag at a lean \$7.75 – where the price was right, I would perform a “double cheeseburger” test to see if the sheets of meat could stay moist through each bite. Unfortunately, Bonnie's did not make the grade, as their patties are on the rubbery side. The iceberg lettuce is crisp and the toppings are neatly portioned, though, with the added twist

of ranch subbed for mayo – and they mix their ketchup with barbecue sauce. Next time I'll stick with the single patty, and hopefully there will be another black-and-white Finnish film playing down the street at Cinema 21 for me to sneak my fries into.

### **The Dairy Queen by Franklin High School**

*SE 56th Ave. & Division St.*

This is no run-of-the-mill grill-and-chill. Opened in 1969, this locally-owned franchise has become a neighborhood institution: on hot summer days, a consortium of dogs, families, and teenagers fill the small patio while a line of cars partially blocks Division St., waiting for the drive-thru window.

What's most endearing about this DQ is its mom-and-pop-ness, the young cashiers' chipper, inept modesty. In line ahead of me, a woman asked what an Orange Julius is. "Uhhhh, wow, I'm not really sure how to describe it!" replied the thick-framed, pock-faced teen. "It's like an orange slushy, but...kinda creamy?" He knew *exactly* how to describe an Orange Julius!

A hot tip: most people don't order burgers here. If you do, the product will be melty and fresh, and will come out before the litany of Blizzards ahead of you. Perfect squirts of mayo complement a warm, juicy-but-firm slice of tomato, which softens up even the beefiest bites. Grab a #4 combo with a small boat of crispy fries, or mix things up with their wonderful Summer Specials board: 2 corn dogs for \$2. 2 chicken wraps for \$3. And so on. Whatever ends up in your bag, consider the grassy slope in the adjacent Clinton Park: on the right day, you can catch a rec softball game, or at least a few adorable dogs and a glimpse of the downtown skyline.

### **Cruiser's Drive-In**

*SE 136th Ave. & Division St.*

Apparently, the best way to ease the pain of urban sprawl is to put two burger-and-ice-cream joints at the same intersection. Eighty blocks east of Franklin High, right across the street from a less impressive DQ Brazier, Cruiser's modest beige-and-brown exterior belies the charming neo-diner decor found inside – clean neon tubes of teal and rose encircle the space, but they don't overdo it with obnoxious period kitsch.

I've always been a fan of open kitchens, and Cruiser's boldly puts their fry cages right out front so you can watch the magic happen while you wait. This commitment to transparency is admirable, but Cruiser's really blows the competition away in the bargain department: all of their specialty burger bags are well south of \$10. Highlights include a Guacamole Bacon Burger and a Fantastic Burger with Canadian bacon and egg – both \$7.10. I stuck to my guns with a double cheeseburger (\$6.95) and was not disappointed: a classic composition with squishy-not-soggy buns and a bed of thick, crispy fries (you'll have to ask for the krinkle kind).

Add corn dogs, coney dogs, and an array of frozen treats, and Cruiser's becomes the everyman's must-stop when stuck out in Powellhurst for a car inspection, or on a long pedal back from the end of the Springwater Trail.

### **Stoopid Burger**

*N Vancouver Ave. & Fremont St.*

If you are tired of food trucks that look like designer tool sheds, Stoopid Burger's mustard-yellow trailer and rickety picnic tables are a must-visit. Though they've only been on the block for a few years, Stoopid Burger possesses an old school spirit that the rows of brand new glass-and-grate condos across the street are sorely devoid of.

The small mobile kitchen is a charm factory: owner John was hamming it up with a colorful band of after-schoolers as I approached. Considering that he is the only cook, you might end up waiting a few minutes. Bring a book. However, once you're claw-fisting that little white sack and cold can of cola, you have a lot of seating options: there are three city parks within ten blocks. Take a walk.

I ended up at the small but lovely Dawson Park, which was buzzing on a Wednesday afternoon at 4pm. My "Get Yo Bread Up" – SB's standard cheeseburger – was compact and saucy (John went heavy with the "Stoopid Sauce") and the hand-cut fries were soft and soggy in the best way. A competent combo, if basic by Stoopid Burger standards: they've made a name for themselves with towers of ham, egg, bacon, and other exotic accoutrements. While delicious, these huge specialty burgers will quickly run you out of the burger bag budget – and possibly into the hospital, which thankfully is also just a couple blocks away.

### **BYH Burgers**

*Pine St. Market (SW 2nd Ave. & Pine St.)*

A new fixture of the trendy Pine St. Market, BYH ("Bless Your Heart") barely made this list on account of their scandalous pricing system; however, impeccable flavor and style points helped them out.

Let's start with the scandal. A single-patty cheeseburger is \$6.50, add \$2 for fries – with a reasonably priced fountain drink, this is borderline burger bag territory! Here's the rub: BYH proudly displays glass bottles of Coca-Cola and Cheerwine, a sweet Southern delicacy I remember fondly from my summer camp days in central Virginia. To complete the triad, I bought a bottle – and my total came out to \$11.50. Doiyoiyoiyoiyoiingggg!

Once the sticker shock wore off, I gleefully devoured the melty beef and cheese. This is truly an exquisite take on the classic, and the glances you'll get strolling through downtown with that crisp white sack and a Cheerwine clenched in both fists are worth the squelched bus fare. And

who needs it when you've got the Esplanade right there for a scenic, urban-contemporary burger bag experience.

**Beaverton Char Burger**

*SW Hall & Allen Blvd.*

At some point, everyone is bound to get stuck in Beaverton. So you might as well soak it in while you're there.

Their patties aren't the juiciest and the lettuce could use some color, but you'd be hard-pressed to find a more authentic Beaverton dining experience than the Char Burger. What struck me as I walked in was the funky atmosphere – enormous potted shrubs adorn the entrance and surround the counter, while huge orange girders hang above delicate lines of speckled robin's egg tile. Garish but surprisingly pleasant, the decor evokes both the American Southwest and the islands of Hawaii – so naturally, the menu is split between dirt-cheap burgers and greasy plates of yakisoba and teriyaki. It's a thing.

Unfortunately, my peace was disturbed by a man listening to a grating YouTube playlist out of his phone speakers at full volume, followed immediately by a whining toddler and her sharp-tongued mother. But I loved how the ladies back in the kitchen would come out and greet their regulars, and one particularly beautiful moment prevailed, reaffirming my affinity for burger bag culture: the effervescent cashier brusquely picked up the ringing store phone. "Hello. Uh huh. Yes, we do have corn dogs!" Click.