Best In Bun

EIGHT LOCAL BURGERS WORTH THE NAPKINS, THE INDULGENCE AND THE RETURN VISIT

written by
Evelyn Martinez & Mark Travis
photography by
Rachel Benavides & Jason Page

A great burger doesn't need much to make an impression, but sometimes it doesn't hurt to go all in. Whether it's a no-frills cheeseburger done right or a towering double-patty stack layered with every possible upgrade, there's no single formula for perfection; only the kind that keeps you coming back for another bite.

Enter: *Best in Bun*. Built from community nominations and online voting, the list spans classic cheeseburgers, veggie burgers and everything in between, highlighting the local spots that consistently rise to the top. The final results are as much about people and place as they are about what's between the buns. Though what's inside every bite surely seals the deal.



WINNER

Best Classic Cheeseburger

El Vago Burger & BBQ

4701 BARRERA DRIVE
361.737.2810 • @ELVAGOBURGERANDBBQ

A visit to El Vago Burger & BBQ might be a bit intimidating for the uninitiated. Not because of the brand's pair of cartoonish, fiendish logos that greet customers at the window—one devil brandishing a spatula and another hoisting a burger—but because of its beefy menu, one inspired by "stoner food" and replete with more protein than a GNC store.

In that sense, El Vago's classic Cheeseburger acts as a sort of gateway beef that might lead you to the parts of the menu where there are virtually no limits to the amount of meat one can pile on (spare a thought for the humble sesame buns employed here). But sometimes it takes an act of perfected simplicity to remind us that a burger derives its soul not from its size, but from its sizzle.

The Vago Cheeseburger mounts a diverse assault on the senses while working within a standard framework. It is decked out with the usual frills—lettuce, tomato, pickles and onions—but the star of the show is the timeless relationship between the succulent 80/20 patty and molten cheese. The cheese seems just as eager as you will be to get to the center of the meat, seeping into the patty's delectable topography, creating a creamy, combustible bite.

Although it has been serving up some of the best burgers in town for more than two years now, owner Alex Arredondo's first entrepreneurial enterprise under the El Vago moniker was selling beard butter at the Corpus Christi Trade Center (the devil in his logo, it must be said, does sport a luscious beard). As he looked around one day, he asked himself, "What does everybody here have in their hands?" The answer was obvious: Food. So he started selling barbacoa and barbecue out of his stall, not expecting it to take off. "I never knew my food was that good," Arredondo said.

"Good" might be understating it. El Vago rapidly grew into a business that needed its own space to breathe, which it found on a corner of a mostly residential area on the city's Westside. The location, with its covered outdoor picnic table seating and detached smokehouse where the barbecue aroma curls off the roof and wraps around the customers, feels ingrained in its neighborhood, a sense that is elucidated when a postal worker hands the day's mail to the cashier ... and then places an order.

Generosity has been an integral part of El Vago's success, and not just in its substantial portion sizes. In June of last year, Arredondo announced on social media that he was offering free lunches to school kids on summer break. In November, he teamed with Smack Eats to serve hundreds of Thanksgiving plates to the community. In December, he ran a toy drive to help provide Christmas gifts to families in need.

"There have been times in my life when I struggled to provide, so I know how it feels," Arredondo shared. "We have a lot of customers who really care about this place, so to be able to give something back to people who need help, it feels like the right thing to do."

WINNER

Best Patty Melt

Price's Chef

1800 S. ALAMEDA STREET
361.883.2786 • PRICESCHEFCC.COM

In the center of the Six Points juncture sits a living monument to a bygone era. In 1941, Dan Price took over a diner along South Alameda Street called The Chef and slapped his name on the sign. It has been a cornerstone of Corpus Christi's culinary scene ever since.

"It's a landmark," Price's Chef general manager Alex Guerrero said. "This place has its own legacy, and we are just trying to keep it going."

When Luis and Zora Guerrero moved their family from Los Angeles to Corpus Christi in 2006, they were looking to get into the food service industry. They considered becoming Quiznos franchisees, but as the sandwich chain began shuttering its local locations, the Guerreros learned of a chance to purchase Price's Chef. While the transition was finalized, Luis worked as a dishwasher for a month before being revealed as the new owner—just like an episode of "Undercover Boss."

Around the same time as the local diner's founding, way over on the coast of California, a restaurateur named Tiny Naylor began serving up a new spin on the hamburger, swapping the bun for rye bread. Some 80 years later, two bedrocks of American gastronomy—diners and patty melts—are alive and well inside the walls of Price's Chef.

"The classics are appreciated by people," Alex Guerrero said. "They withstand the test of time."

Portioned on a classic flat-top grill, each ingredient gets paid special attention, temperatures tailored by design: The grilled onions are cooked slowly on the side while the 85/15 Angus patty simmers on the main stage. Once they are sporting a nice summer tan, the patty is smothered and covered with the onions, coated with a savory Swiss cheese and laid on seeded rye bread. With its sharp angles and starchy blend, the toast offers a crunchy contrast to the soft, juicy inhabitants dripping off its flat surface.

The red, white and blue Price's Chef storefront has been an indelible part of Corpus Christi's iconography for longer than most patrons have been alive, and it's easy to see why. Sliding into a booth here is like entering a time portal. Akin to the Americana aesthetic, the prices here are from a different age, offering customers the chance to take an affordable bite out of history; one you won't soon forget. Because taste, after all, is timeless.

Executive Surf Club

WINNER

Best Veggie Burger

Since 1990, the beating heart of Corpus Christi's Marina Arts District has echoed the rhythm of the tides. Sensing that life's current was carrying him away from the roaring waves that brought him vitality and peace, surfer and restaurateur (in that order) Brad Lomax clutched at the essence of the bay and attempted to bring it to shore.

"My dad and his buddies were just getting too old to [surf] anymore," Richard Lomax, who took over from his father as CEO of Water Street Restaurants, said. "So he wanted to create a place with a real casual environment where they could have a beer and a burger and reminisce about the glory days."

The Executive Surf Club was founded as an act of preservation, capturing the fleeting feeling of youth and infusing it into a restaurant conceived with equal attention paid to atmosphere and appetite. But there was one particular palate that wasn't yet catered to, requiring a natural addition to the menu: The Veggie Burger. "We had to have it for the hippie surfer guys," Richard Lomax said.

Although it sprouted up as a bespoke option for health-conscious surfers, the Veggie Burger's appeal quickly spread to even the heartiest carnivore. It features a custom-crafted black bean patty, anointed with an ambrosial house-made ranch and bedded down with freshly sliced lettuce and tomato. There's precision in the patty's shape, maintaining a uniformity that conceals a depth of flavor.

"We tried 20 different patty mixes before we decided on this one," General Manager Louis Contreras said. "And the way we grill and sauté the patty, I think it makes it stand out."

With an archipelago of starches dotting the herbivorous canvas, each mouthful is a connection to our roots, capped off with an intriguing spice, a gentle reminder that Mother Nature bites back.

306 N. CHAPARRAL STREET
361.884.7873 • @EXECUTIVESURFCLUB



WINNER

Best Brunch Burger

Padre Island Burger Company

11878 TX-361 • 361.949.3490
PADREISLANDBURGERCOMPANY.COM

At its core, a brunch burger comprises two essential elements: a fried egg, representing breakfast, and a hamburger patty, representing lunch. This savory symbiosis has quelled the most voracious of appetites, dating all the way back to late 19th-century Germany, even serving as a form of medicine for some.

Whether you are trying to shake off the night before or simply looking to jumpstart your day with a bold bite, Padre Island Burger Company's "The Hang Over" burger will quickly convert all comers from sluggish to satiated. And perhaps it can make that headache magically disappear, too.

"We see a big uptick in orders for this burger on Saturdays and Sundays," owner and head chef Jason Johnson said. "We attribute that to the party atmosphere on the Island on the weekends. And during the summer, it's all week."

Packing a powerful protein punch on a pillowy sourdough bun, The Hang Over showcases a scrumptious 75/25 certified Black Angus mix. Adorning the precious fatty patty are crispy corn-smoked bacon strips, a slice of block American cheese, meticulously sautéed caramelized onions and, of course, a picturesque sunny-side-up egg. To enjoy this burger in all its glory, take The Hang Over out onto PIBC's breezy patio; upon first bite, it will appear as if the runny egg is melting off the sun itself. Just be sure to bring plenty of napkins with you.

While the burger basks in the erupted egg's golden rays, your envious fries might begin to crave a viscous dressing of their own. They will yearn for the yolk. Want our advice? Order a side of Dr. Padre sauce and another of garlic aioli and fashion your fries as spoons.

As a formally educated chef with a bachelor's degree from the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, Johnson had an open mind when choosing what kind of culinary corner to carve out for himself in his hometown. While scouring Corpus Christi for a place to call his own, a spot on Padre Island became available.

"As soon as I saw the location," Johnson said, "I knew it needed to be a Jimmy Buffett, cheeseburger-in-paradise-style restaurant."

On the titular song of his 1994 album *Fruitcakes*, Buffett preaches that "there's a thin line between Saturday night and Sunday morning." Should you find yourself crossing that line, don't fret—this burger paradise has just the order for you.