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Where the meat hits the grill

Ricardo shares one of his favorite places for succulent burgers

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The word “new” gets thrown around a lot, and it has devalued the meaning. Long gone are the times where the word “new” implied innovation, since the word meant a better way of doing things.

Lately when people use “new” and “restaurant” in the same sentence, it usually has to do with location and not content. But it doesn't need to be too far from home. You don't need to reinvent the wheel, just the desire to do it better than everyone else, to smooth out the wrinkles and finely tune the operation.

I know one of those spots, and while I am swinging through Seaside I know I need to pull over and catch my breath. I curb it at Seaside's newest burger stand, Phat Burger.



Phat Burger opened about a month ago in Seaside. A trio of food, from foreground clockwise, features the Phat Burger, cheddar and bacon avocado burger with onion rings; chicken sandwich, with bacon and cheddar with sweet potato fries; and the fish & chips. (Richard Green | INK)

Owner Tami Newton greets me as I walk through the door. The smell of those half-pound burgers hits me like a slap in the face, the smell of meat and fire and the reaction between the two.

“We have been open for about four weeks and I have been amazed a restaurant this size could start out so well,” Tami says. “We have hit the ground running and really wanted to try something a little different. We always wanted a place around here where we could get a good burger and there really is no spot like that.”

There is a race car theme running through this spot, with checkered flags adorning the ceiling and wrenches and tools decorating the walls. But co-owner James Newton pulls my attention to the prized piece in the collection.

“This here is a poster from the Laguna Seca Trans-Am race in 1969,” James says. “I like this poster, and I don't know where you can even find another one like this.”

I look at that poster for a while, with its American flag turned on its side and a silhouette of a car screaming out of the center. It makes me think of Peter Fonda's jacket in “Easy Rider.”

James is probably right; there is probably no place you could get your hands on one of those. Trans-Am racing is close-fendered, production-based, V8-powered sports cars, and my vast racing knowledge will tell you 1969 was the first year that Trans-Am racing was held at Laguna Seca. So it is like having anything that was made on the first run of the assembly line. Cool.

My bacon cheeseburger comes to me steaming hot and, as requested, with a fried egg on top for the added danger of yolk dripping down my chin. But I think the egg adds more than just an element of danger. The egg adds a smoothness to the burger, a flavor that is thrown in there that doesn't add a whole lot of consistency — no extra crunch or chewing like when you stuff your burger full of lettuce or onions, just some added flavor.

Tami points out that next to the pickup window there's a condiment bar where you can build your own burger however you like it.

“We send our burgers out a little plain because not everyone likes their burger with everything,” she says.

I sit outside, where this place has its own corner on Del Monte and Elm. It's nice here and, looking at the other people sitting in the sun or staying cool inside, I am glad that people seem to be enjoying themselves..

All that was needed was a burger.