

Cool & hot: Phat Burger uses racing decor, simple food to create a tasty experience

The Monterey County Herald

A little Googling suggests that the word "phat" is an inventive superlative meaning "sexy" or "cool," conceived and delivered in the rap idiom of hip-hop culture. In a 1994 issue of American Speech, John and Adele Algeo postulate that "phat" may have been devised as an acronym for "Pretty Hips And Thighs."

It becomes painfully obvious, and altogether ironic, that eating at Seaside's Phat Burger will by no means create pretty hips and thighs. But co-owners James and Tami Newton do not shy away from their red-meat-and-grease grub concept, with PHAT an acronym for Pretty Hot And Tasty.

Standing, almost defiantly, kitty corner from the undisputed king of hamburgers, McDonald's, Phat Burger has been packing them in since its April opening on Del Monte Boulevard near Canyon Del Rey.

The Newtons own the venerable Breakfast Club in Seaside, which for years has become the Mecca for morning pilgrims in search of coffee, eggs and carbs. They branched out into burgers because "there's not another family-run burger joint around," said Tami, not including Ronald, Jack, Wendy, Carl or The King in that description. They also wanted their extended family to catch the restaurant bug; the Newton's son James, Tami's sister Marykay Riparetti, her husband Doug and their son Robert Barb have joined the fold.

The concept is simple: 10 burger varieties (including a veggie burger), paired with fries and a drink for around eight bucks. Combo upgrades (sweet potato fries, onion rings or chili cheese), Phat extras (five cheeses, including bleu) and tasty add-ons (chiles, onions, mushrooms, avocado, fried egg) require a nominal fee, but a condiment bar offers plenty of free add-ons.

Beyond burgers, Phat offers pulled pork, chicken, steak, calamari, fish and a chili cheese dog. Drinks run the gamut from bottled water to sodas, iced tea and lemonade (with milk shakes on the way).



Evan Johnson, left, 4, and his brother Wesley, 9, fill themselves up at...Phat Burger (DAVID ROYAL/The Herald)

HE SAID

I stroll into PHAT with my own acronym on the tip of my tongue — WWESD (What Would Eric Schlosser Do?). Schlosser, the author of "Fast Food Nation," the frightening sociocultural report that skewered an industry and the mass-model food chain it creates, would probably give this place a drippy thumbs up.

At least Phat Burger is a better alternative than those golden arches across the street. Phat supports local vendors, reinvests in the local economy and puts together much of its food in-house (including hand-forming their ground beef).

It's a pretty hot and tasty experience, to be sure, but something that must be eaten in moderation. That's not an easy task, especially after discovering Phat's sweet potato fries, bought frozen from a distributor but better tasting than any that have ever passed my lips; crispy on the outside and creamy and sweet on the inside. And Phat changes its oil frequently, which allows one to taste the sweet potato, not the grease.

Three visits, no major disappointments. They keep it simple. Charbroiled meat, soft buns and no skimping on extras. A bountiful condiment bar offers everything one could think of to put on or alongside a burger (I think I ate my weight in kalamata olives).

The pulled pork is tender and juicy, and perfect after I douse it with more tangy barbecue sauce and top it with a fat onion ring. The chicken breast is moist and smoky, and goes well with my choice of pepper Jack, red onions and jalapeños. My third visit prompts me to order a half-pound Phattie with a fried egg add-on, all the rage back East, I'm told. It's delicious but the egg is completely cooked through (the patty, too, unfortunately); I would prefer the yolk slightly runny, which would create its own decadent sauce.

A few nitpicks. Service is efficient and pleasant, but at times redundant. Food comes out of the kitchen next to the condiment bar, and servers deliver it to the tables. It arrives, and guests turn right around and walk it back to where it came from in order to add condiments. This creates logjams, but the final product is well worth the inconvenience.

SHE SAID

If you squint to blur the view of the drive-through Starbuck's across the street, Phat Burger could be Mel's Diner. Seriously, this little joint is a throwback to happier days. And, it deserves spiffier neighbors than Home Depot and my auto mechanic. I can't help thinking it's what teens need, at the mall perhaps, rather than designer Chinese or corporatized pizza — especially when they can get a half-pound burger for \$5 (they can always mooch fries off their friends' plates).

A cute racing motif spruces up this clean, dinky space (the heated deck is fairly roomy, though). This ode to gearheads has checkered flags and pennants, trophies, hot rod prints, car parts and a small handpainted racetrack mural (Laguna Seca, perhaps?). Our polite young server snags supplies from an oversized, red Craftsman tool cabinet.

Even as I pretend to consider the veggie burger, I cave and order the bleu cheese burger. Also, I go with the sweet potato fries because ... well, they're good for you, as everyone knows. I can only eat half of this \$8.50 combo, and Mike steals half my fries (see?). The cheese is mounded on top, melty and sharp. At the condiment bar, all the toppings look very fresh, so I stack on some bright red tomato slices, green leaf lettuce and a few rings of red onion. Our teen companion wolfs the Hawaiian burger (\$5.50), which includes two pineapple rings and plenty of sweet teriyaki sauce. On our way out, I count the crumpled napkins piled around his plate (6).

I like that your food is delivered by a server, rather than retrieved when your number's called. And I like the condiment bar idea, which could be expanded further to include even more interesting stuff — garlic aioli, sundried tomatoes, olive tapenade?

Never mind that I'll be drinking Slim Fast the rest of the week. This little nostalgic, albeit caloric, splurge was worth it.

Mike Hale and Melissa Snyder approach their reviews from a couple's perspective. All visits are made anonymously. Comment at tablefortwo@sbcglobal.net.GO!

PHAT BURGER 1520 Del Monte Blvd., Seaside, 394-7428 ·Hours: 11 a.m.-8 p.m. (open until 9 p.m. on Fri.-Sat.) ·Cards: all major ·Wheelchair access: yes ·Bar: none ·Price range: \$5-\$9.75 ·Must-orders: All burgers; pulled pork; sweet potato fries ·Web site: www.phat-burger.com ·Pluses: good value; cute concept; parking in lot; creative variety of burgers; nice patio; quality ingredients ·Minuses: Tiny interior; noisy; no table for large parties ·The bottom line: Fun quick stop for quality burgers, fries and more.