
Lessons on Change From Who Moved My Cheese

My favorite food since I have been very young is a hamburger topped with cheese, cooked medium rare. An obvious reason for why this would be my favorite food is the fact that a cheeseburger is the single best tasting food that has ever been prepared. There are, however, many other explanations for my choice, which are rooted in sociological factors related to the environment in which I raised. These factors have no doubt crept themselves into the subconscious of many other Americans, making the burger an enduring icon of American cuisine. It is through the American ideals it encapsulates, and its association with hypermasculinity that, "The Cheeseburger," has undergone and maintained a nation-wide adoption and adoration, that has undoubtedly affected my preference for it.

Albeit my most cherished meal, burgers are a desired choice for individuals all across the world. To better understand the universal abundance of burgers, as well as its strong prominence within the United States, it is important to examine the key features other than its delicious, savory flavor that has made it an attractive option to all. Firstly, a burger is not only a filling, hearty meal, but it has a very easy and fast preparation. Whether bought in a fast food setting, served at a cookout, or ordered as a main course in a restaurant, it is a formidable choice that is quick and easy, and a predictable selection for any consumer. As well, the burger is inexpensive, being one of the cheapest forms of beef, so it appeals to all social classes. Another redeeming quality of a burger is its adaptability; there are endless possibilities to customize this sandwich to one's desires: one can vary the cheese, pick out of a plethora of sauce choices, include a few pieces of bacon, and if you are feeling adventurous, maybe throw a fried egg on top. Its versatility is what allows a burger to adhere to the ever-growing climate of artisanal foods within the United States.

Many basic characteristics of a burger are closely associated with fundamental principles of American culture. One such example is the ubiquity of fast foods and comfort foods. It is no accident that fast food culture has been adopted so strongly by the American people, more so than most other countries. Fast food taps into our nation's consciousness, satisfying deep-rooted American values. Americans appreciate efficiency; they like things to be reliable, inexpensive and easy, and burgers embody those qualities, both as a fast food or gourmet option. As well, Americans like having freedom in their choices, and a burger's flexibility in its recipe is in line with this sentiment. In his book, *Hamburgers in Paradise: The Stories Behind the Food We Eat*, Louise Fresco argues, "what made McDonald's, Burger King, Jack in the Box, the once ubiquitous White Castle, and their like such successful companies was not the hamburger itself, nor the franchise system that has enabled it to penetrate all markets, but the systems and technology used to ensure that identical hamburgers would roll off production lines all over the world to be served to a public that knew exactly what to expect." When in doubt of what to order, most will rely on the trustworthy cheeseburger when one cannot make up his or her mind. In addition, fast food culture serves as an archetype of American exceptionalism and innovation; the postwar growth of fast-food chains coincided with the rise of the United States on a global scale. The period of industrialization is when America came of age, and America was the leader in industrializing food. There was this sense of pride in the "American Project" in which food became a staple element. It is for these reasons that there are elements of nationalism surrounding our perception of the burger. Like most Americans, I have an inherent

loyalty toward my country, and the "American-ness" of burgers contributes to my love for them.

In *The Importance of Living*, philosopher Lin Yutang asks, "what is patriotism, but nostalgia for the foods of our youth?" Even in our very heterogenous society, the "burger and fries" remains as an iconic duo in our national cuisine. This meal triggers a sensation of nostalgia; it has strong symbolic ties towards a time where things were indefinably easier and better – an allusion towards "the good ole days." This sentiment is so widespread and deeply entrenched in our society and rituals. I, along with most Americans, enjoy the simple pleasures in life. I appreciate traditions and a sense of family, and eating a burger triggers a memories of Barbeques and cookouts, activities that combine these appreciations. Barbeques are recognized as staples of "the American culinary canon," such that there are even a few national holidays associated with them. As well, among my fondest childhood memories are times when my father and I would grill burgers with my grandfather in his backyard in Florida. Rachel Herz explains in her book, *Why You Eat What You Eat*, the reasoning behind some of America's food choices. She claims, "comfort foods are usually foods that we ate as children because, when it comes to aromas and flavors, our first associations are the ones that stick most indelibly." For this reason, whenever my dad or I spot a stuffed burger option on a menu, we know exactly what to order. This sense of yearning has even crept its way into popular culture: many television series elicit an emotion of homesickness. One such example of this is in the series, *Riverdale*. *Riverdale* utilizes food, specifically, the "burger and fries," to create sensations of longing for a simpler time. This response is provoked in many Americans, as they can all collectively resonate with their own respective memory of being a carefree child eating as much junk food as their young hearts desire. Watching the protagonists in *Riverdale* frequent Pop's Chock'slit Shop creates this unconscious envy within the viewer, and consuming a burger functions as a subtle reminder of memories of a recent past, providing a small taste of the pleasure that is longed for. I can personally relate to this TV show sentiment: I have lived in New York City my entire life, and one of my favorite characteristics of my home is its diner culture. For over ten years, I would spend nearly every Friday afternoon at EJ's Diner; my grandmother and I would frequent her local diner on weekends; my friends and I loved diners for quick meals, and we would end almost all of our nights at City Diner – and almost every time, I could be counted on to order a burger and fries. It is for these reasons that I hold a burger so near and dear to my heart.

Sexism and gender stereotypes are issues that still plague humanity. Although gender roles have changed over the years, they still remain prevalent and powerful within the United States. While gender biases might only be present in a subset of our population, their existence still has a profound effect on our society as a whole. Notions of hypermasculinity have created momentum for men to strive to become the "ideal stereotypical male" which bleeds into most aspects of our culture, including culinary customs. Similar to how a fancy, protein free salad is considered to be a feminine food option, most forms of beef, and meat in general, have a more "manly" connotation attributed to them. The greasy, calorie-laden cheeseburger is the poster-child food choice for the stereotypical American male. The evolution and prevalence of mass media has allowed it to become a major vehicle in the expansion of toxic masculinity. Professional sports is a fundamental component of American culture, yet, it mostly adheres to a male-dominant crowd. Stereotypical gender roles imply males as the "stronger, superior sex," which has led to male divisions to be more widely celebrated than their female counterpart. What does the stereotypical sports viewer look like? It is an overweight American male in young adulthood, holding a beer in one hand and a burger in the other. What further constructs this sentiment are the advertisements that are aired during these games. A major offender of toxic masculinity suggestiveness is Carl Jr., a prominent fast food franchise. Carl Jr. has received a

lot of backlash for many advertisements it created because of the not-so-subtle sexist elements integrated in them. Yet, these ads are still aired and are repeatedly produced and played. One such example is the advertisement released in 2012 that is widely considered to be among the most sexually explicit TV commercials. It stars American supermodel Kate Upton eating a burger, but with blatantly obvious sexual allusions. This commercial feeds into "the man's" sexual appetite, which aims to connect the viewer's sexual desire with a craving for that juicy burger that Kate Upton seemed so satisfied by. Another good example is the X-men themed advertisement that Carl Jr. aired in 2014. This commercial premised a female shapeshifter morph into an athletic and attractive adult male as she took a bite out of the X-Tra Bacon Thickburger as the words "MAN UP" took over the screen. This is a great demonstration of how the media plays on widespread hypermasculine sentiment to evoke a connection between man and meat. A recent study showed that Americans spent over half of their total leisure time watching television, so it is implausible to believe that the constant bombardment of subliminal messages did not only further promote hypermasculinity, but also the categorization of burger consumption as a "manly" behavior. While there are many other negative qualities that I do not possess that are implied with hypermasculinity, I believe that I have fallen victim to taking enjoyment in conquering a juicy double cheeseburger and feeling like a man.

While my initial hypothesis solely regarded appetitive qualities, I have come to the realization that my passion for a cheeseburger transcends the experience that occurs on my taste buds. While grateful for the liberty to shape my own food self, there is no doubt that many sociological factors have contributed to which foods I favor over others. It is the combination of its patriotic undertones, its association with my fondest memories, and the machismo that it elicits that has motivated the cheeseburger to transition from a childhood preferred food item to a meal I would blissfully eat every day.