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[Archives > Living > Cafe](#)
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Just a hamburger, or a time machine?

BY CHRISTOPHER HARROP

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AURORA | Tradition may have as much to do with taste when it comes to people's love of hamburgers.

"The hamburger is a big part of growing up in America," said Gayle Jetchick, executive director of the Havana Business Improvement District, which is at the forefront of the May celebration of National Hamburger Month.

While many palates differ on how long to cook them and which toppings are best, the mere mention of "hamburger" often evokes vivid images and memories for most.

"Cookouts in backyards, corporate picnics in the park, and, in my case, my parents packing us five kids in the station wagon and driving over to the local Bates hamburger joint for the 10-for-\$1 burgers back in the late 1950s," Jetchick recalled.

In Aurora, there seems to be no shortage of restaurants serving up the beefy mainstay of American culinary culture just the way you remembered it as a youngster.

Case in point: One of Aurora's newest burger joints, Freddy's Frozen Custard and Steakburgers at The Gardens on Havana.

Like many burger joints in Aurora, Freddy's smacks of a certain nostalgia — a stylized revival of a bygone era of cruising with the top down with the radio dial tuned to the raspy howls of Wolfman Jack.

Timothy Miller, a manager at Freddy's, cites "the amount of fun our employees have working here" as part of that timely atmosphere.

"Our employees are the face of Freddy's. ... If the people serving them are having fun and doing a good job while doing it, our customers pick up on that."

The hot-rod red accents on much of Freddy's interior go a long way in explaining the mood so many of Aurora's burger joints try to effect.

"There has always been a connection between the automobile and the drive-through hamburger joint," Jetchick said. "The Havana corridor is traveled by thousands of vehicles a day, people on the go, looking for a quick lunch or dinner."

That link between mechanics and meat is evidenced each year with events like Cruzin' Havana, as car collectors and other assorted motorheads rekindle their memories of cruising with the radio blaring while making a meal of burgers and milkshakes.

When the folks at Freddy's experience their first Cruzin' Havana since opening earlier this year, it'll likely be another opportunity to answer the most-frequent question they get: Just what exactly is a "steakburger"?

"We have to explain what a steakburger is to a lot of people here in Colorado," Miller said. "There's not that much a difference. It is smashed a lot thinner than what you'd get (elsewhere)."

While Miller wasn't about to divulge any special ingredients or methods used to craft Freddy's signature sandwich, he was quick to trumpet its relative leanness compared to thicker patties and the reactions customers have when trying their first steakburger.

"Most people say, 'This is a great burger.' We're known for the quality of our food," Miller said.

But Freddy's isn't the only joint along the Havana corridor looking to cash in on the American consumer's quest for a bite of Americana served on a bun.

Among the more classic takes on the burger is the Hamburger Stand: A brown paper bag conveys your standard patty, onion, pickle and sesame seed bun neatly enclosed in a thin wrapper that allows the heat and mustardy aroma of the sandwich breathe. Joints like Five Guys Burgers and Fries, also along Havana, promote their patties with a decorative flair and atmosphere straight out of "American Graffiti."

And any conversation about hamburgers is incomplete without its traditional counterpart, the french fry.

"I really like our fries," Miller said. "They're thin, shoestring-cut so they don't absorb a lot of oil."



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