W05 – Critical writing

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We tried 50 old-school burgers all over Hampton Roads. Here are the best.

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The search for the perfect burger is stitched deep into the angioplastied heart of America. The argument over who has the best is contentious and controversial, and always democratic.

In a perhaps foolhardy gesture, I've set out to find the best old-school, low-cost burgers in Tidewater, in a marathon through dive bars, ancient burger shacks, ordering windows and drive-throughs from Virginia Beach to Williamsburg.

After polling readers and plenty of other people, I tried any suitable burger that more than one person independently told me was the "best." Over a month, I tasted more than 50 old-school burgers in 36 restaurants.

Nothing fancy or goofball was allowed, nor was any burger that cost more than \$8 any time you want to order it — happy hour and daily-special prices don't count.

Allowable condiments were mayo, mustard, ketchup or "secret sauce." Toppings might be lettuce, tomato, onion, pickle or chili. Bacon and ham were allowed, but not ordered by default unless it was part of a signature burger. And if the spot had an option on "all the way," that's how I ate it.

No cheese more advanced than cheddar was consumed. And if anybody asked me my preferred burger temp, I said "medium." Otherwise I took my burger as the house made it.

In the end, there was a clear winner: Quite simply, it's one of the best burgers I've eaten in any city, at any price.

Here are my favorite 10 low-cost classics.

Best Burger: Cheeseburger at Salmich's Burgers and Hoagies, \$6.50

1371 E. Little Creek Road, Norfolk, 757-587-7205, salmichs.com (Note that Salmich's will be closed for a one-week vacation, Aug. 25 to Sept. 2.)

The way some normal humans share pictures of their children, I have for weeks showed off pictures of a hamburger.

It is the basic cheeseburger served at Salmich's, a white-brick burger and hoagie shack on an industrial stretch of Norfolk's Little Creek Road. Salmich's shares a wall with a check-cashing station, and on every available surface it advertises the Buffalo, New York, heritage of owners Sal and Michele Lone.

Though the menu at the 3-year-old counter spot also includes fanciful burgers made with chorizo or peanut butter, the basic cheeseburger has no ingredients more complicated than lettuce, tomato and onion. It doesn't even sport a pickle.

But it is monstrous, a towering Babel of juicy beef and cheese that speaks to a thousand tongues, so large it does not seem its center could hold.

Still, says Michele Lone, there's nothing particularly special about how they make it.

"We use ground chuck, roll 'em into balls and squish 'em down on the grill," she says.

The Salmich's burger, it turns out, is the culmination of a series of good decisions.

The buns have the sturdy, flexible give of light-butterfat brioche that's toasted but not obliterated on the flat top. The onions are shaved razor-thin and placed above the meat. The tomatoes are likewise thin-sliced and placed beneath the meat, amid juice-drenched shredded iceberg.

The patty is an unadulterated 8 ounces of Angus chuck, seasoned with salt and pepper and garlic. Each burger is smushed onto the flat top to caramelize its outer husk and cooked perfectly to temp within, skills the couple honed after years of short-order cooking in Buffalo.

The cheese is beautifully melted. Condiments are ketchup, mayo and mustard all at once, and they are applied to both buns. No bite — no fraction of any bite — goes without crispness, umami, salt, acid and fat.

Ordered medium, the burger is juicy as a peach. Its flavor is what generosity tastes like.

That the Salmich's cheeseburger exists at all is reason for gratitude. That it costs a mere \$6.50 is nothing short of a miracle.

Runner-up: Viking burger at Viking Burger, \$5.56

13650 Warwick Blvd., Newport News, 757-874-1269, vikingburger1.com (Note: In September, Viking will move to a new location at 11745 Jefferson Ave., behind the IHOP.)

In the high-roofed house of a former Wiener Circle on Warwick Boulevard, Newport News's Viking Burger made its name by rebranding the massive cheese-stuffed Juicy Lucy burgers of Minnesota after the Vikings that call the state home.

But the basic Thor and Viking burgers are a Ragnarok all their own. The Viking burger is as simple as it comes: It is a quarter pound of hand-formed beef patty, topped with spicy turkey-meat chili made fresh each day with spices from cumin to garlic to secret things. You can add tomatoes and lettuce and such for free — but why?

The bun is brioche, which, like the terrifyingly unctuous buns at Jack in the Box, are buttered before they are toasted until they curl perfectly around the burger. The cheese is American, a gooey mat of patriotic richness deep in the DNA of the fast-food pantheon — though Viking Burger, I should warn, is not particularly fast.

Get the Thor burger, and the chili is swapped for a heavenly pile of onions caramelized on the grill.

Each burger is crisp and meaty and greasy in all the right ways, and in their basic state they attain a fatty balance that soothes the reptile brain into submission.

But for the hungry, about a dollar more will make it a filling double patty. Another dollar will add chili to your Thor, or onions to your Viking —an all-encompassing apocalypse of a burger that will ring in at \$7.87.

You cannot stop Ragnarok. Why fight it?

3. Third-Pound Cheeseburger at Monk's Place, \$5.65

649 Princess Anne Road, Virginia Beach, 757-454-6214

There is a version of burger entrenched in Hampton Roads, found at most stops older than 30 years. It consists of a white-bread bun, lettuce, tomato and raw onion. Condiments are mustard or mayo, but never both unless you're a weirdo. The cheese is American. There is no pickle.

This is the burger found at Manny's in Norfolk, at Bill's Hot Dogs in Chesapeake, at Monty's Penguin and What-A-Burger in Newport News. It is also found in countless dive bars that have escaped the march of time. My favorite is found at Monk's Place, a 73-year-old Creeds bar popular with bikers and fishermen and anyone who feels like getting lost in the back channels of Back Bay that still feel a little bit wild.

Monk's serves its beer only in bottles and accepts only cash, symbolized by the countless marked-up dollar bills attached to the walls and ceiling. If you show up mid-afternoon, you'll find them hand-forming their third-pound beef patties in advance — before cooking them to order on an impossibly hot grill that's been seasoning for decades. It is not gourmet, but a single bite is like vertigo, a tunnel back through decades of Hampton Roads.

And if you want a pickle, it's on the side.

4. Cheeseburger at Jack Brown's, \$5.49

131 Granby St., Norfolk, 757-961-7486, jackbrownsjoint.com

Jack Brown's is a Virginia burger chain founded in Harrisonburg, deep in the Shenandoah Valley, with a simple set of guiding principles: No tomatoes. No lettuce. Craft beer. Good meat. Specifically, the marbled American Wagyu from Idaho's famed Snake River Farms.

In its downtown Norfolk location, the menu is full of goofball concoctions made with mac and cheese or bacon jam, and they are good. But do yourself a favor, just once: Try the cheeseburger. It comes with a hand-formed quarter-pound patty, a gooily melted American-cheddar blend, and one of the world's most perfect things: a Martin's potato roll.

In its elemental form, Jack Brown's burger is a smudgy, smushy, squishy and wonderful thing — made with fatty meat that tickles the pleasure centers. Add the tangy secret sauce sitting on the counter for some acid balance, and it is soft heaven.

Just watch your wallet if you order the rotating beers, which have no price tag on the menu. A pint of Commonwealth IPA might set you back more than \$10.

5. Carolina Burger at the Big Grill, \$5.25

309 Aragona Blvd., Suite113, Virginia Beach, 757-647-3419, thebiggrill.us

When Helen Hendricks bought the now decade-old Big Grill from Rick Shelton, tucked off Virginia Beach Boulevard on Aragona, she figured she might serve the food of her native Jamaica. Then she spent some time at the little breakfast and lunch diner and decided not to change a single thing, except to maybe add a liquor license.

Thank God the Carolina burger remained: Fresh and hand-formed quarter-pound patties are smashburgered on a flat-top, loaded up with the same garlicky Greek-style meat chili that goes on the hot dogs, yellow mustard and chopped onions in lieu of North Carolina's customary slaw. It is spicy, lightly tangy and tastes like a memory the first time you try it.

Oh, and if you'd like some Jamaican jerk, try the Big Grill's Wednesday-only dinner nights — but call ahead to see what's on the menu.

6. Da Mack Burger at Gourmet Burger Bistro, \$7.57

6083 High St. W., Portsmouth, 757-484-7365; 880 N. Military Highway, Norfolk (inside Military Circle mall); gourmetburgerbistrova.com

After a mere three years, the Gourmet Burger Bistro is an institution in Portsmouth, announcing itself as the best burger in that city pretty much since it opened. Now that the Bistro has expanded to Military Circle in Norfolk, it also serves dang near the best classic-style burger in Norfolk. And you'll be greeted at the mall kiosk by Bistro founder Major Mahoney, same way you got it in P-town.

The Da Mack burger is a cheerful behemoth made with juice, char and some friendly seasoning in its beef. Top that with a cross of bacon strips, sauteed onions and some Thousand Island dressing, and it is

a parade of salt, savor, light sweetness and tang. Show up on \$1 wing Wednesday and get that burger with a side of chicken.

7. Frank's Burger at Bubba-N-Franks, \$5.99

299 Floyd Thompson Blvd., Hampton, 757-788-7060; 15149 Carrollton Blvd., Carrollton, 757-238-2148; 5405 Portsmouth Blvd., Portsmouth, 757-337-0359. bubbanfranks.com

If you're getting a burger at this Carrollton-founded smokehouse, you have to ask yourself a question: Are you a Bubba, or are you a Frank? The Bubba burger is a sweet-sauced stack-up of bacon and onion ring. The Frank is a classic Carolina: spicy all-meat chili, chopped onion, American cheese and cabbage slaw. Turns out, I'm a Frank guy.

But either way, the meat is a half-pound of lightly smoked ground Angus, and the voluminous burger grease and sauce will soak at least halfway into its fluffy bun. The Frank's burger isn't perfect — it has a little too much bun in order to handle all that grease. But it is generous, intensely meaty, and a little bit wild. And I thought about it a little too much, the day after first trying it.

8. Joe Burger at Pop's Drive-In, \$3.75

6555 George Washington Memorial Highway, Grafton, 757-898-6870

The Pop Burger at Pop's, a spartan 70-year-old diner accessible only to southbound traffic on U.S. 17 in Grafton, is a decent enough rendition of the classic lettuce-onion-tomato version you get everywhere in these parts.

But the all-the-way Joe Burger is more generous: It is lettuce, tomato, onion, pickle, mustard, mayo and ketchup, delivered atop a half-pound burger patty seasoned with salt and pepper and garlic, cooked up on a long-seasoned flat-top grill. It tastes like all the things burgers have. It tastes like America.

9. Shackburger at Shake Shack, \$5.69

296 Constitution Drive, Virginia Beach, 757-427-4480, shakeshack.com

Among the "better burger" chains, Five Guys and Mooyah failed. Cook Out came close, but could not stack up to better chili burgers on this list. Freddy's and Hardee's didn't have a chance. But Shake Shack, alone among national chains, edged into the top 10 on the strength of their Martin's potato rolls and that trademarked Pat LaFrieda burger blend — quality attested to by the long lines that still dog their new Virginia Beach location.

The Shackburger is simplicity itself ,with mayochup fry-sauce topper, lettuce and fresher-than-expected plum tomatoes, while the Smoke Shack burger's bright cherry-pepper relish is almost too fancy to include in the taste-off. But consistency is key — and three visits yielded three results, ranging from smashburger char to light pinkness. So here it is, just clinging to the top 10.

10. Manny Burger at Manny's Burger, \$4.29

The signature item at this little 60-year-old Lafayette Boulevard ordering window is a dad joke disguised as a burger: a "ham" burger topped with lettuce, tomato, raw onion and a strip of grilled and lightly curled pork. As befits ham, the default condiment is mustard. Manny's shack is a piece of Norfolk history, and its ranking here at number 10 will likely be controversial: No burger shop was nominated more often than Manny's by readers. To many, Manny's is what "burger" means.

It's true a trip to Manny's, eating at picnic tables under the shade of a tree, is one of the region's true throwback joys. But the burger can be a little on the dry side, and the patty doesn't have much character. Still, every Manny's burger does contain at least one perfect bite at its center — a rarely struck chord in which all parts converge into mustardy, savory, salty harmony.

Honorable mentions: The inflated 10-ounce lettuce-tomato-onion-mayo burgers at Bill's Hot Dogs (Chesapeake); the ultra-cheap thin-bun and grilled onion burgers at Perfectly Frank (Norfolk and Chesapeake); the Plain Jane burger at General Public (Suffolk), which likely would have made the list if its price didn't rise to \$9

Also tried: 21 Burgers (Virginia Beach), The Barking Dog (Hampton), Baron's Pub (Suffolk, Portsmouth), Brick Anchor Brew House (Norfolk), Cook Out (all over), Famous Uncle Al's Hot Dogs (Shore Drive location), Five Guys (all over), Freddy's Frozen Custard and Steakburgers (Suffolk), Hardee's (all over), Haven Inn (Norfolk), J&K Style Grill (Virginia Beach), Judy's Pub (Virginia Beach), Kelly's (Ghent location), LA Dog (Chesapeake), Lulu's Hot Dogs (Chesapeake), Margie and Ray's (Virginia Beach), Mooyah Burger (Hampton), Monty's Penguin (Newport News) Poppa's Pub (Virginia Beach), Pungo Pizza (Virginia Beach), Retro's (Williamsburg), Rick's Cheesesteaks (Williamsburg), What-A-burger (Newport News)

Not tried: Smitty's Better Burger in Hampton, which will re-open sometime this year after a fire in March

Virginia Beach gets first Malaysian restaurant, with terrific meat skewers and earthy spice

https://www.pilotonline.com/food-drink/article 4d909bc4-4b22-11e9-a0b5-a7f3424e0c88.html

Malaysia is the stovetop of Asia — a swirl of cultures and foods as rich as almost any in the world — with famous street-food hawker stalls taking influences from China, India, Indonesia or Thailand.

Penang Town, a Malaysian restaurant that opened in January at 649 Newtown Road in Virginia Beach, contains equal multitudes.

The menu includes curried noodles flaming red with heat, delicate peanut-sauced meat skewers, beef rendang cooked down into a paste of spice, and Indian-style flatbreads that have been puffed and crisped until they're lighter than a baby's soul.

It is a wealth of flavors that are likely unfamiliar to diners in Virginia Beach. Penang Town, a well-lit spot decorated sparsely with plant fronds and a framed picture of amorous orangutans, is the only traditional Malaysian restaurant for hundreds of miles. It's also likely the first in Hampton Roads.

Owner Evelyn Loh, a native of the northern Malaysian city of Perak, says diner after diner has thanked her for opening the restaurant. Before that, she says, they had to drive to Washington, D.C., to taste Malaysia's national dish of nasi lemak coconut rice, or stir-fried char kuay teow noodles mixed with shrimp and breathing with the smoky character of the wok.

To make the latter dish, Loh must bring in the broad, flat noodles fresh from New York each week.

And even if you've never had it, char kuay teow is an immediate comfort, its flavor made deep by the Malaysian practice of bringing sauces to nuclear heat to bring out the aromatics. This requires quite a bit of skill, leaving Penang Town chef Andrew Goh a window of mere seconds between underdone and over-fried.

The result on the char kuay teow is smoky and pan-seared depth, amid the light crunch of bean sprouts, the herbal grassiness of chive and the fishy umami of shrimp paste. When he ate this dish in Malaysia on his show "Parts Unknown," the late Anthony Bourdain stopped eating to express his affection to the dish privately: "I love you, noodles!"

You likely will, too. But whatever you do, each meal at Penang Town should start with two things — satay skewers and roti bread.

Satay skewers (\$7.95 for five) are perhaps the most famous and accessible dish in Malaysia, meat skewers of chicken thigh or beef flank grilled and marinated in lemongrass and spice.

And at Penang Town they are near-perfect. The chicken skewers are crisped lightly on the outside and tender within, bursting with both juice and flavor. The lovely peanut sauce — blending shrimp paste, curry and chili — is more decadent luxury than necessity.

Meanwhile the roti flatbread (\$4.95) is an air-puffed take on the old-school Indian flatbread, arriving as pillows of bread layered like pastry — as if air itself had been fried into ecstasy. The roti, too, comes with a dipping sauce, low and pungent with earthy curry notes. When you finish, it will be difficult not to order a second round.

After that, you can pretty much choose your adventure — but you won't go wrong with fried rice dishes, or curried noodle bowls like a pungent, red sauced curry mee made with fresh egg noodles and topped with chicken and airy puffed tofu that soaks up flavors.

But in particular, the pineapple rice (\$12.45) is bizarrely difficult to stop eating once you begin. It's a bit like a fried Asian take on risotto, cooked in chicken broth and mixed with shrimp paste for beautiful richness before being fried to light crispness. The rice is mixed with an unlikely cast of textures and flavors: pineapple, raisin, carrots, peas, cashews and shrimp. Somehow, it's unendingly good — a family-reunion salad from an obscure aunt.

Another hallmark is the rendang — a dry, curried meat cooked down until the spices hang glistening on and in the meat. For those who've tried the Indonesian version, the Malaysian take at Penang Town is slightly wetter and a little less intense. The cubes of beef flank arrived coated in curried sauce as thick as you'd expect in St. Louis barbecue, less fiery than earthy in its spice.

Loh says she tends to steer first time visitors away from the aggressive flavors in the bak kut teh Chinese herbal soup. But for the adventurous, it's worth a try: a roiling ferment of soy, savory mushroom, sweetly aromatic goji berry and unplaceable roots and herbs.

The belachan (shrimp paste) vegetable dishes, meanwhile, are a point of pride in Malaysia, but on our visit the high-temp cooking got the better of the restaurant: on a mixed-veggie dish, our eggplant and okra had been less well-cooked than obliterated, dissolving into mush.

Meanwhile. the mango shrimp is beautiful — arriving in halved and cored mango skins — but Loh admits it's a bit of a sop to American palates, coming on like the solid-food equivalent of sweet and sour sauce. But to a sweet palate it's also delicious, mixing tart, lightly underripe mango with a generous profusion of shrimp.

The beverage menu is either expansive or spartan, depending on your tastes. The beer list consists only of a display bottle apiece of Miller Lite and Sapporo at the door to the kitchen, while fruit-infused waters span exotic longan and lychee and rambutan, each singular and delicately sweet. Malaysian coffee and tea, meanwhile, are cousins of earthy, milky Indian chai.

Truly sounding the broad menu at Penang Town will still require many more visits — whether to try Singapore fried rice noodles that have become a dim-sum staple, Indian chili-sauced beef, or a salted egg yolk fried chicken that has become a food trend across Southeast Asia. Chances are, the effort will be rewarded.

The vibe

Sparse, brightly lit Malaysian restaurant with a world of curries, noodles, meat skewers, rice dishes and fried flatbreads

If you go

Penang Town, 649 Newtown Rd., Suite 109, Virginia Beach.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 9:30 pm daily, except Wednesdays.

Food prices: Appetizers, \$4.95-\$8.95; non-seafood entrees, \$10.95-\$13.95; seafood entrees, \$15.95-\$17.95

Drinks: Minimal beer and wine, lots of fun fruit juices and teas

Kid-friendly? Chow fun and wings are good for kid palates

Vegan/veg: Many vegetable and tofu dishes, but check to be sure they don't contain shrimp paste.

Disabled-access? Yes

Reservations? Online

Parking: Lot

Contact:757-456-1888, penangtownmalaysian.com.

Review: We tried KFC's new Chicken & Donuts sandwich and we have many feelings

https://www.pilotonline.com/food-drink/vp-db-kfcs-chicken-and-donuts-review-20190917-5cxct6d3mnegrapoe2372nez2e-story.html

The chicken sandwich-storm has reached a new high, and it has reached a new low.

Meet the Chicken & Donuts sandwich from Kentucky Fried Chicken.

It has been weeks since the shade-filled rise and ignominious fall of the Popeye's chicken sandwich, a fast-food battle waged mostly on Twitter against fellow chains Chick-Fil-A and Wendy's, and occasionally in slow-moving Popeye's drive-throughs.

These days, Popeye's is indefinitely out of chicken sandwiches, the victims of their own success. And here comes chicken-giant KFC's somewhat tardy response.

This week, about 40 KFC locations in Virginia and Pennsylvania received test shipments of KFC doughnuts.

These doughnuts can be bought singly for a dollar, sure. Or they can simply come alongside a bucket of chicken for a fresh layer of sugary fat to go with your savory fats.

But most importantly, starting Monday, the chain began serving a fried chicken sandwich that is alarming in its single-minded, lipid-swaddled simplicity. The Chicken & Doughnuts sandwich consists of three things: A whole doughnut on the bottom, a whole doughnut on the top, and an extra-crispy fried chicken breast in the middle.

This chicken and donutwich, of course, is a thing that should not be. It is a grease-soaked atrocity, a perversion of sandwich. It is even, perhaps, a form of violence.

We bought three as soon as we found out they existed.

"They're so good!" said our cashier at the Monticello Avenue KFC in Norfolk, when we rolled in for our dose right when the doors opened. "I'm going to take one home when I get off shift."

The news of the sandwich had yet to travel extensively on Tuesday morning. Our KFC location was conspicuously empty at 10:30 a.m., especially compared to the 10-deep drive-through two doors down at the Chick-fil-A.

But the mood at KFC was buoyant: The staff seemed to love these doughnuts.

Were they Krispy Kreme, we asked, like the doughnuts in the Krispy Kreme Double Down sandwich the chain debuted in 2010?

"Oh no," said our cashier, proudly. "These are KFC."

But they still taste like Krispy Kremes. At least, the KFC doughnuts also come glazed in that same saturated, viscous sugar-grease that refuses to leave any surface it comes into contact with: a sticky sludge of wish fulfillment for the reptile brain.

But the doughnuts are a little denser than the basic Krispy Kreme glazed. Indeed, one of the main hallmarks of this sandwich is its heaviness. You can feel its chicken-doughnut heft as both a threat and a promise: This sandwich is going to hurt you.

So how is it? On most bites of the sandwich, it tastes a lot like doughnut. It tastes like doughnut with an inch-thick accent of celery-salted chicken.

It tastes, in fact, like you just shoved two piping-hot doughnuts into your mouth — which you did, you filthy animal.

Eating this sandwich allows you to understand what the duck in turducken feels like: stuffed with chicken, while being devoured by something much larger than yourself.

The KFC Chicken & Donuts sandwich tastes like guilt, and regret, and sadness. It tastes like all of the reasons everyone leaves you, eventually.

It also tastes pretty good.

A chicken and doughnuts sandwich has respectable precedents in the world, of course. It's a steroidal take on chicken and waffles. The combination is a decadent staple in certain circles — perhaps most prominently at Federal Donuts in Philadelphia, helmed by acclaimed chef Michael Solomonov of Israeli spot Zahav.

The KFC version is not art. But it has merits. The usual, greased-chalk texture of KFC chicken is here subsumed into the greater and more powerful grease of the doughnuts, which are quite decent glazed doughnuts of the Krispy Kreme school.

Eaten once, and only once in your life, the sandwich offers all the novelty and pre-evolutionary pleasures of a fried Twinkie or Oreo at the state fair.

Three colleagues in our newsroom ate the Chicken & Donuts sandwich side by side, and the first response uttered was a colleague's deep and seemingly involuntary "mmmmmmmm," which escaped before actual language returned.

"I need to stop eating this," said another colleague, before taking yet another bite. The pleasure is less guilty than shameful.

And when you are done eating, the glaze and grease of the doughnuts will remain in your throat. It will cover your hands and your lips and possibly the tip of your nose.

Each sandwich is delivered with a wet nap alongside the customary napkins, and this will clean your hands. But it will not cure the oozy coating in your gullet, or the lingering feeling that you have done something very wrong to yourself.

Treasure that feeling: It is your vaccine against eating this sandwich ever again.

Here are the KFC locations in Virginia selling the Chicken & Donuts sandwich, starting with locations in Hampton Roads:



1263 N. Military Highway

3690 Sewells Point Road

Virginia Beach:
556 Newtown Road
2072 S. Independence Blvd.
1010 Independence Blvd.
Powhatan:
1793A Southcreek One
Colonial Heights:
1620 Boulevard
Hopewell:
3011 Oaklawn Blvd.
Chester:
12321 Jefferson Davis Highway
Chesterfield:
10310 Iron Bridge Road
Petersburg:
3335A S. Crater Road
5420 Boydton Plank Road