

Growing in quality

Burgerville plans to take its local brand of fresh fast food to Seattle, Salem

By JEANIE SENIOR

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The chief executive of Burgerville, the locally owned fast-food chain that's been featured in *Gourmet* magazine and praised by "Fast Food Nation" author Eric Schlosser, says it's probably time to expand.

Vancouver-based Burgerville now has 39 restaurants, mostly concentrated in the Portland-Vancouver metro area; its farthest outposts are The Dalles to the east, Albany to the south, and Centralia, Wash. to the north.

Now, says Tom Mears, son-in-law of Burgerville's founder, the late George Propstra, he's thinking of Seattle as a place that needs Burgerville. "I think there's something we have to offer in terms of service and food products they don't have up there," he says.

Ditto Spokane and the Tri-Cities in Washington, Bend and Salem in Oregon.

He'd also like to see a Burgerville in downtown Portland.

Tara Wefers, Burgerville's vice president of marketing and communications, says she regularly gets e-mail from Salem residents, complaining that they have to drive to Albany or Monmouth for a Burgerville fix. But then, she says she also gets e-mail from people wondering when the next seasonal special — say, Walla Walla Sweet onion rings, Oregon blackberry milkshakes, or sweet potato fries — will be back on the menu.

Clearly, this is not your average fast-food restaurant.

For one thing, it's the only fast-food chain in the Pacific Northwest to make all of its burgers from Oregon Country Natural Beef, the same additive-free, vegetarian-fed beef sold by Whole Foods Market Inc. and New Seasons Market.

Local products are a focus at Burgerville, from Alaska halibut to Tillamook cheese, Sunshine Dairy products, Yo-Cream frozen yogurt, fresh berries grown in Boring and Woodland, Wash., and bagels from Portland Bagel.

When Burgerville contracted with Oregon Country Natural Beef to supply all its ground beef in 2004, the privately held company also became a member of the Food Alliance, a nonprofit organization that promotes sustainable agriculture. The turkey burgers served at Burgerville are made from Diestel Family Ranch's free-range turkey, another favorite of natural foods markets.

The big challenge now, Mears and Wefers say, is finding a source of free-range vegetarian chicken and eggs in sufficient quantity to supply Burgerville. Wefers calls the goal "happy chickens."

Good ethics from the get-go

High quality food from local suppliers is an idea stressed by his father-in-law, Mears says.

The idea of seasonal menu items started under Propstra, who retired in 1992, with fresh strawberry shakes and shortcake to brighten the gloom of late winter. It's expanded now to include seasonal foods year-round — including chocolate hazelnut shakes December through March. The shakes, also offered as smoothies, are made with Yo-Cream and feature Oregon hazelnuts.

Propstra, too, was comfortable with the idea that food at Burgerville would cost a little more, because of the quality involved, Mears says.

The chain does serve thrifty items — there are burgers for 99 cents and cheeseburgers for \$1.19. The "Colossal" burger, which Mears says is his favorite, has a half-pound of ground chuck and costs \$4.29. It's \$2.30 extra for a basket with fries and a soft drink, a bit more to add Tillamook cheese. A salad with Oregon hazelnuts and smoked wild coho salmon costs \$4.99.



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Propstra, who died last year at age 90, was one of Vancouver's most respected citizens; he had donated more than \$13 million to the city, which recently named a downtown community square after him.

Mears says Burgerville continues to stress ethics in its business practices, along with community involvement. "It's not just a gimmick to increase sales; it really is about helping the community thrive," he says.

The population's growing

Propstra started Burgerville in 1961, when he opened two restaurants — one of them a little walk-up hamburger stand in downtown Vancouver that's still in business. By 1970, there were nine Burgervilles.

"I don't know how George picked locations," says Mears, who joined his father-in-law's company in 1966 as manager of the Burgerville at Northeast 82nd Avenue and Glisan Street. In those days, he says, the competition was more likely to be mom-and-pop burger joints than McDonald's or Burger King.

Mears speculates that Propstra "wanted to go into locations where he felt there was no competition and there was a need." He adds, "I remember when we built out in Canby, you could almost play baseball in the street."

It's been a while, however, since Burgerville added new restaurants: The last three to open were on Southwest Carman Drive in Lake Oswego, at Southeast 92nd Avenue and Powell Boulevard, and at Southeast 26th Avenue and Powell Boulevard.

Burgerville has no franchisees — all the restaurants are operated by the parent company, The Holland Inc., whose ownership remains with Mears and other family members.

The Holland also operates a couple of Noodlin' restaurants, which serve "savory noodle dishes with global origins," at 3404 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd. and at 3487 S.W. Cedar Hills Blvd. Dubbed "quick casual," the restaurants are hip and neighborhood-oriented.

Original plans called for opening numerous Noodlin's in short order, Mears says. However, the process has slowed a bit because the restaurants "didn't open with as much enthusiasm as we had anticipated." But he says there will be more.

Burgerville has about 1,600 employees working in the restaurants and about 40 who work at corporate headquarters. The company does not disclose its earnings.