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I CAN HAS CHEEZBURGER?

BY JONATHAN GOLD

Wednesday, December 12, 2007 - 10:00 am

The cheeseburger paradigm has shifted a lot of times over the last several years, and I have been privileged to taste most of the contestants, from the Kobe-beef slider at Cut, to Hungry Cat's pug burger, to the burger at Manhattan's db Bistro stuffed with foie gras, truffles and braised short ribs. Sang Yoon's cheeseburger with blue cheese, onion marmalade and bacon may be L.A.'s most popular culinary import since Spago pizza, if not Michel Richard's tuna burger. We are lucky to live in a city with Tommy's and Chroni's, the Apple Pan and Pie 'n' Burger, Tops and In-N-Out.



Say cheese: If a wild-eyed chef suggests assiette de fromages, do what the nice man says. (Photos by Anne Fishbein) [\(Click to enlarge\)](#)



Giggling gourmets: Executive chef Michael David with sous chefs Dong Choi (left) and Eric Samaniego (right) [\(Click to enlarge\)](#)

But until I am persuaded otherwise, I swear that the best cheeseburger I've ever tasted was the one I had for lunch at **Comme Ça** last Tuesday, a thick, dripping, loosely packed puck of bloody-rare beef, glazed with a quarter inch of good Cheddar, barely but adequately contained in a soft, shiny-crust hamburger. I am an admirer of both the Orchestrated Crispness and Mannerist Condiment schools of cheeseburger construction, but Comme Ça's burger is from an older tradition where ingredients are allowed to speak for themselves, unfussy hamburgers that taste like good aged meat. It's also the only remotely American dish on the menu.

"It's basically my mother's hamburger," chef David Myers confessed when I ran into him later in the week. "It's what I grew up eating in Ohio."

Comme Ça is Myers' stylish new brasserie on the southern edge of West Hollywood, a sleek, theatrically lit restaurant that has the look of a dining room restored to use after 70 years of mothballing, although it was most recently a falafel joint: black and white, lined with mirrors, filled with actual French speakers and smartly dressed citizens of the local design community. The oysters are briny, crisp and alive. The house made terrines and pâtés are first-rate. There are snails in garlic butter and frisée salads with bacon and poached eggs, *choucroute garni* on Wednesdays and braised pork belly on Saturdays. The bread, including the wonderful sweet baguettes and those hamburger buns, comes from Boule, the

bakery run by Michelle Myers. The wine list includes French village wines that are uncannily appropriate with the food; the house carafe is a decent Côtes du Rhône. And there's the roar, that great, happy roar of music and clattering plates and people with a little too much wine in them, and the sense that somebody, somewhere in the restaurant, is having the most memorable evening of her life.

Sona, Myers' breakthrough restaurant, is an exquisitely Los Angeles restaurant, a serene bubble of luxury and refinement with an endless, nuanced tasting menu. A dinner there last week included cubes of sansho-pepper-scented tuna married to sautéed sweetbreads, passion-fruit cannoli stuffed with peekytoe crab, tiny Nantucket scallops flavored with dates and poppy seeds, and rare duck with red wine and pumpkin seeds toasted to resemble the exact crunch of its skin. Sona is the furthest thing imaginable from the Rabelaisian assault of a brasserie.

Comme Ça, squarely in the tradition of places like Balthazar in New York and Balzar on Paris' Left Bank, aims to be all things to all people, open early for croissants and coffee and late for oysters and champagne, serving both a hand-chopped, tuna-salad-like steak tartare and mussels steamed in a killer broth enriched with cream and Pernod, formal entrées like sole meunière and roasted pork chops with apples and bistro classics like steak-frites and lemony skate grenobloise with capers and brown butter. The Alsatian tarte flambée, a brasserie classic, is especially good here, a sort of puff-pastry pizza smeared with crème

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fraîche and sprinkled with cubes of smoky bacon.

Is there good onion soup? A great one, actually, based on a dark chicken stock, a bit salty, informed but not overwhelmed by its gooey mantle of melted Gruyère. Will you find *coq au vin*? The best in town, deeply flavored with bacon, glazed with a syrupy reduction of red wine, pallid chicken flesh lent an almost steaklike intensity. The beef bourguignon — made with thick slabs of the shoulder cut, the paleron, from which flation steaks are sliced — is black and crusty outside, almost molten within. Even the crisp-skinned roast chicken breast, served with lightly creamed farmers-market spinach, is delicious.

Is the duck confit with chewy *spätzle* a little dry, the shoestring fries less than crisp, the beef stroganoff a dish unready to be exhumed from the sarcophagus of the 1950s? Perhaps. Comme Ça is not perfect.

The cheese guy, Todd Jasmin, late of the Beverly Hills Cheese Shop, has established his own small fiefdom at the front of the restaurant, master of not just the massive wheels and stinking puddles that surround him but of practically any dish into which cheese may be incorporated, a separate cheesy domain with devoted minions as well as ovens and cauldrons of its own — he has been compared to Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, up the river and uncontrollable. If a wild-eyed chef staggers up to you and suggests cheese soup, the cheese-saturated pastry puffs called *gougères* or a grilled-cheese sandwich prepared with smelly Quebec obscurities that you will never see or sniff again, you should probably go along with what the nice man says, no matter how set you were on a *croque monsieur*. If he suggests a cheese course, so much the better.

The desserts at Comme Ça are from Michelle Myers' Boule and, except for the tarte Tatin, tend to resemble dainty pastry-shop confections more than they do the kind of lusty floating islands and crèmes caramel that you usually see at brasseries. If you have room after the cheese, you might as well try the Boule cake, a chocolate dome filled with hazelnut mousse, which is just the thing to ease down the strong plunger pots of coffee.

But if you want that cheeseburger, you're going to have to come for lunch.

Comme Ça, 8479 Melrose Ave., W. Hlywd., (323) 782-1178 or www.commecestaurant.com. Open daily 8 a.m.–11 p.m. Full bar. Valet parking. AE, MC, V. Dinner for two, food only, \$74–\$96. Recommended dishes: cheese soup, tarte flambée, coq au vin, cheeseburger (lunch only).

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