

# WE'LL MEAT *Again*

EVEN IN A FRENZY OF PLANT-BASED DINING, THE AGE  
OF THE CARNIVORE IS NOT YET FINISHED

BY SARAH B. HOOD





**P**lant-based menu items continue to soar in popularity, and last March, the *New York Times* ran a 3,500-word article by Ligaya Mishan exploring the “End of Beef.” Nonetheless, Canadians still like to eat red meat.

Last January, Farm Credit Canada (FCC) published research showing that, when the pandemic hit, “beef demand took a small initial plunge in 2020 Q1, then rose steadily until the end of the year.” In 2021, preference for beef waned again, but in proportion to rising prices. FCC could not predict with certainty that demand for beef would continue to drop; the future of other meats is equally uncertain.

### WHAT’S DRIVING DEMAND?

Diners tend to choose red meat for three reasons. The first is the pandemic-influenced desire for takeout-friendly comfort foods. With the increasing interest in food transparency and health, many diners are attracted to meats with “premium” credentials. Also, a hunger for international flavours tempts some to choose menu items based on flavour first, before considering whether or not they contain meat.

Among red-meat comfort foods, burgers have led the charge. The most craveable are smashed or stacked — or both. Smashed burgers are simply pressed onto the grill, giving them a thinner profile and a slightly crispy exterior. Stacked burgers are towers of two, three or even four patties, often with a proprietary sauce.



Kelsey’s Ultimate Bacon Burger (*left*), New York striploin from Concorde Group (*above*)





Moxie's has seven items on its menu that contain red meat, including a number of steak offerings

## COMING SOON

Despite the trend towards meat-less menus, targeting the carnivore market is by no means a losing strategy.

Quirky gourmet burger joint **The Burger's Priest** recently opened a Calgary location, its 28th store and third outlet in Western Canada.

Fast-casual **Big Smoke Burger** is actively seeking franchisees and expanding its existing footprint in Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario. The chain offers an unusual lamb burger option.

**South Street Burger**, which serves fresh Angus beef, recently opened its 35th location, in Niagara Falls, Ontario, adding to a stable that includes outlets in Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta and Dubai.

Outside the hamburger sphere, **Firehouse Subs**

has been making inroads into Canada since its entry into this market in 2015, with a meat-focused menu that features deli favourites such as sliced roast beef, corned-beef, brisket, pastrami and Italian meatballs. With more than 50 locations in Ontario and still expanding, the company was acquired in late 2021 by Restaurant Brands International.

Montreal's **Boustan**, an on-trend Lebanese-style spot, is moving into a big expansion push, with numerous new locations in Quebec and Ontario opening or planned. Besides a wide choice of vegetarian options, menu staples include kibbeh (beef croquettes), kafta (beef patties), beef shawarma and kebabs.



In this category is Hard Rock Café's Messi Burger, a promotion with soccer star Lionel Messi. It's a monumental tower of double beef patties, provolone, chorizo and caramelized onion with a fried-egg option and a smoky sauce. Dairy Queen Canada has launched a line of signature Stackburgers, available as double or triple stacks in six variations, including the Loaded Steakhouse and the FlameThrower, with hot sauce, jalapeño bacon and pepper Jack cheese.

When they do eat meat, diners want to know how and where it was raised. To that end, the Canadian Cattlemen's Association has introduced a Verified Beef Production Plus (VBP+) program, a voluntary certification program that guarantees certain standards for food safety, animal care and environmental stewardship in beef-cattle operations.

Menus in every establishment are — or should be — advertising the quality of the meat used in every dish. This applies at all price points; for instance, in the QSR category, A&W promotes its grass-fed beef; Harvey's has an Angus program and Wendy's has an in-house Animal Care Standards Program.

As guests cautiously re-acquaint themselves with indoor dining, operators will have more opportunity to showcase dishes inspired by global flavours. Cuisines that will likely meet with approval are inventive tacos, katsu (Japanese-style panko-crust-





pan-fried cutlets), Korean dishes, Middle-Eastern kebobs and Thai-style satay skewers.

The market for halal meat continues to grow, and supply is expanding to meet demand. Alberta's Department of Agriculture is looking into increased halal meat production. Edmonton already has an exclusive halal slaughterhouse, Alberta Bros. Meat Packers, which is processing beef, elk, goat, lamb and bison. Canada Meat Group operates a meat-processing plant in North Bay, Ont. that can handle halal beef products.

## CROSS-COUNTRY CHECKUP

"At Moxies, we have seven items on our menu that have red meat. It comprises about 22 per cent of our total sales, because burgers fall into that category, and we sell a lot of burgers," says Joanne Forrester, COO of the coast-to-coast chain. Steaks, an Indian-inspired beef vindaloo and a beef dip account for the balance of the red-meat offerings on a menu that has been slightly reduced during the pandemic. Moxies' steak is certified Angus beef, and the burgers are 100-per-cent Canadian ground chuck.

Recently, the steak and beef-dip offerings have shown slight declines. Since the onset of COVID, "business lunches are not as prominent as they would have been," Forrester says, which likely accounts for the drop in midday steak orders. However, "for special occasions like Mother's Day, steak frites or New York steak tend to be the most popular items on the menu."

In the premium-casual category, "as long

as there's a supply of meat, there will be a demand for it," she says. "While people will not be eating steak as often as they were, they still will be eating it."

At the Ontario-based chain Kelseys Original Roadhouse, "people are eating more sirloin, because when they're getting back into restaurants, it's about treating themselves," says Shannon Lawler, director of Marketing.

Kelseys' Bacon Bourbon BBQ Burger, the Ultimate Bacon and Cheese Burger (both \$17.99) and the AAA sirloin are among the chain's top-10 menu items. Although Kelseys offers a plant-based burger, "we have 100-per-cent Canadian ground-chuck burgers that are double-stacked, and I would say 98 per cent of people are ordering them," says Lawler.

"The crazy thing is we are one of the only full-service restaurants that has a build-your-own burger," she says. Guests can choose their bun, patty and toppings, such as guacamole or bacon. "We have our legendary spinach dip; that's what they come to Kelseys to get, and they can put it on their burger."

In the new spring menu, Kelseys is breaking out two steak-topper options (chipotle shrimp and roasted mushrooms) into stand-alone menu items. "Our guests are coming into our restaurant to truly enjoy themselves,"



Messi Burger  
from Hard Rock  
Café



Major Tom burger

## NOT JUST Peanuts



Thai-food fans understand the attraction of spicy, salty, sweet peanut sauces, and Elvis famously loved peanut-butter-and-bacon sandwiches. Ever since The WORKS Gourmet Burger Bistro launched its outrageous Reese's Peanut Butter Cup burger back in 2015, peanut butter has been turning up on patties across Canada. Most recently, Burger King announced it would be debuting a Peanut Butter Stacker for the South Korean market: a classic burger with a creamy peanut-butter-and-cheese sauce. Numerous other outlets offer burgers guaranteed to stick to the roof of your mouth: The Bigs Ultimate Sports Grill in Newfoundland antes up with its Spicy Peanut Butter Burger (\$19.99): mozzarella, bacon and homemade spicy peanut butter. Darrell's in Halifax is known for its Peanut Butter Burger (single: \$15.69, double: \$18.68).

At Toronto's Bar Hop, the Peanut Butter Bacon Burger (\$15) features aged cheddar, double-smoked bacon, peanut butter and pickled jalapeño.

The Next Act in Edmonton offers a PB&J Burger (\$19) with crunchy peanut butter, house-made bacon jam and cheddar.

There's a Peanut Butter Bacon Burger (\$18.50) with peanut butter, bacon and cheddar at Hudson's Canada's Pub in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Beast Unleashed at Vancouver's BC Place just launched its Elvis Burger: dill pickle, smoked bacon and peanut butter.





says Lawler, “and really gravitating towards those items that they might have missed over the last couple of years.”

In Alberta, naturally, diners love local beef, says Karen Kho, owner and operator of the boutique grocer/deli/caterer Empire Provisions and co-owner and partner of the two-outlet Lil' Empire Burger in Calgary. Staples include the smashed Empire Hamburger and a beef hot dog that comes three ways: plain; with chili and cheese sauce; or Korean-style, with kimchi, nori, scallion, sesame, gochujang barbecue sauce and mayo.

“Everything's made fresh and prepared to order with local, naturally raised beef; we're making a point of using locally made products for all of our offerings,” says Kho. “Our hot dogs are made at Empire Provisions, highlighting local products and making sure that it's coming from well-loved animals.”

The pandemic has not dimmed the trend for Albertans to eat locally and better. “I think there's still a strong affection for local suppliers,” she says. “But there has been a dramatic increase in prices; it's priced a few people out. Our reaction is perhaps to show less of these red-meat options.”

At Calgary's Lil' Empire Burger, staples include the smashed Empire Hamburger and a beef hot dog that comes three ways: plain; with chili and cheese sauce; or Korean-style, with kimchi, nori, scallion, sesame, gochujang barbecue sauce and mayo



Calgary's Concorde Group, with 21 unique, concept-driven establishments, is not immune to sticker shock. At the high-end Major Tom, “people want the ribeye, the short ribs, the tenderloin, the striploin. Things like the hanger steak, the flank steak are not as cost-effective as they used to be,” says Garrett Martin, Culinary Director of Special Projects.

“A very large percentage of our guests are ordering meat. If you're coming to Major Tom, you're here for a special night,” Martin says.

Concorde Group's other properties match their red-meat offerings to the ambience. Lulu Bar has beef-tongue skewers with Thai garnishes. Surfy Surfy has a beef taco. Sky 360 offers lamb with roasted polenta, an anchovy vinaigrette, anchovies and summer squash, which, Martin says, “is one of our best sellers.”

Martin does acknowledge a growing interest in meatless dining; however, he says, “what we've found is there's always going to be a large population that is doing whatever other people aren't.” **FH**

QUINN CAMPBELL (LIL' EMPIRE BURGER)



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