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AL'S EMPORIUM

Wall Street Grinder Churns Out Comfort Burgers

By AL LEWIS

A DOW JONES NEWSWIRES COLUMN



Wall Street Burger Shoppe, at 30 Water Street in Lower Manhattan, is serving "Sub-Prime Meltdown" burgers, with Swiss cheese, sauteed mushrooms and caramelized onions, for \$7.

"The burger is a comfort food," said Heather Tierney, who opened the eatery in March. "Especially in times of economic downturn."

Add a side of "hedge fries" (a mix of onions and potatoes) for \$4. Or slip back to a simpler era of economic disasters with a "Milken shake," a mint-chocolate concoction named for junk bond king, Michael Milken.

"It's the color of money," Tierney said.

As Wall Street grinds itself into chuck, consumers may increasingly find themselves unable to afford steak. But the burger, which soared in popularity during the Great Depression, is always within reach.

No credit. No problem.

"I will gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today," said J. Wellington Wimpy, who was never a free-spending U.S. president or member of Congress, but a 1930s comic strip conman.

Someone should name turkey burgers after Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers. How about a Wachovia with cheese? A WaMu slider? Or a Big IndyMac?

I might eat a Freddie but what's this Fannie burger all about?

In a TV commercial that Jack in the Box Inc. (JBX) did last year, its executives could not stop laughing at the word "Angus." These purveyors of ground sirloin demanded that their ping-pong-ball headed spokesman, Jack, point to the part of the cow where one gets Angus meat.

"I'd rather not," Jack warily replied.

CKE Restaurants Inc. (CKR), parent of Carls Jr. and Hardees, sued, identifying itself as the butt

of the joke.

Fast food has always been a tough business, with McDonald's Corp. (MCD), Burger King Holdings Inc. (BKC), and Wendy's International Inc. (WEN) duking it out at the top. McDonald's now relies on Europe for growth. And Wendy's is merger meat, soon to be acquired in a \$2 billion buyout by billionaire Nelson Peltz and his Triarc Cos. (TRY).

Through it all, a new class of burger has arisen, at places such as Arlington, Va.'s, Five Guys Burgers and Fries; Nashville's Back Yard Burgers; Bobby's Burger Palace, by Food Network chef Bobby Flay, in Lake Grove, N.Y.; and Prairie du Sac, Wisc.'s, Culver's, home of the ButterBurger.

Rick Schaden, who grew Quiznos subs to more than 5,000 locations, is going into the burger business, too. He now runs Consumer Capital Partners, a Denver venture capital firm, and he's funding a new chain called SmashBurger.

The SmashBurger is about as tasty as a lump of meat can get. It's a ball of fresh-ground Angus, smashed onto a hot grill with a stamping tool, leaving it crispy outside and juicy inside.

Tom Ryan, a managing partner at Consumer Capital Partners, has a Ph.D. in flavor and fragrance chemistry and a master's in lipid toxicology. He is also the guy who created the McGriddles sandwich at McDonald's and the Stuffed Crust Pizza at Pizza Hut. Now, all of his brainpower is going into smashing hamburgers.

"Almost everyone can afford a SmashBurger every once in a while," said David Prokupek, chief investment officer at Consumer Capital Partners.

The chain has grown to six stores in Colorado, and plans to expand to Kansas and Texas, growing to about a dozen stores by year-end. It is taking up relatively small spaces in well-trafficked but inexpensive retail centers because Consumer Capital Partners is wary of real-estate markets.

"We have seen this coming," said Prokupek. "Our stores can do ... one-third of the volume they are currently doing and we'll survive. ... Then, when things get tough, the best sites and the best people will come available."

Meanwhile, the credit crunch has not ended the quest for the world's most expensive hamburger. Earlier this year, Wall Street Burger Shoppe launched a \$175 Kobe beef burger, shamelessly topped with black truffles, seared foie gras, Gruyere cheese and flakes of real gold.

Tierney said she wanted to outdo the \$120 double truffle burger at Daniel Boulud's DB Bistro Moderne, which lists for as much as \$150 when truffles are in short supply.

She also wanted to leap past another Wall Street favorite, the \$81 hamburger at The Old Homestead. But she was quickly outdone.

In June, a Burger King in London launched a sandwich costing 95 British pounds to raise money for charity. That's \$200 in U.S. currency.

Tierney doesn't concede defeat. She complains her foreign competitor is simply being propped up by the weak dollar.

She still manages to sell about two \$175 burgers a day.

The first customer to try it came in wearing construction clothes. He paid in cash and would not

five his name.

"When he was done he said it was the best burger he ever had," Tierney said. "He said he was going to come back the next day and have another one, and he did."

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