

White Castle burgers: A holey eating experience

By LOUISE OKRUTSKY

With jagged turrets suggesting medieval architecture run amuck, the White Castle's porcelain exterior is still the best advertisement for the hamburgers with the holes.

Unchanged since 1929, when the restaurant designed its buildings along the same lines as the Chicago water tower, the structures are an example of the company's attitude.

The folks at the Castle thrive on tradition.

While the market is flooded with breakfasts, cartoon-character-inspired food and lots of dressing on double deck hamburgers, the Castle has managed to survive by dishing up a modest-sized burger without frills.

With the exception of introducing frozen and dehydrated foods to the kitchen, the burger has remained the same since 1916, when Walter Anderson realized he had devised a different way to serve hamburgers and waited for the world to beat a path to his door.

Today, White Castles are scattered across the country, with the Detroit regional office in Farmington Hills.

BUT THOSE GLEAMING emporiums of burgers and fries would have remained stalled as roadside shacks if Anderson hadn't met real estate man E.W. (Billy) Ingram, who was to become the king of the Castles. Anderson sold out his share of the property in 1933, but Ingram kept on adding the turreted fast food restaurants to the American landscape. Today, his son, E.W. (Billy) Ingram Jr., continues the family tradition.

It's a plan that's seen some success. In the Detroit area last year, about 18 million of the burgers were consumed, according to Frank Silva, area manager.

Silva chalks up the number of sales to the White Castle code.

"We try to serve quality products and hire nice personnel," he explained.

The hamburger they serve up is essentially the same as the one Ander-

son flipped off the grill in 1916. The five holes in the patty are part of the White Castle scheme to make a quick sandwich. The holes allow for even cooking of the meat while relieving the cook of the task of flipping over the burger on the grill.

In fact, Silva adds, the burger never touches a White Castle grill. A layer of onions shields the patty from the grill's hot metal grids.

THE BUN, made at the company's own bakery, is placed over the patty to absorb the meat's juices. All the products are stored in a 30,000-square-foot warehouse in Farmington Hills.

As for competition, the Castle opts out on royal prerogative—the company says it isn't engaged in a commercial race over burger sales.

"We worried about competition years ago," said Silva. "Then we realized we weren't worrying about our own business. So now we're concentrating on business and not thinking about competition."

"We like to think we don't have competition. We serve a good product."

Like other fast food restaurants, the Castle has its share of customers and non-customers who refuse to leave. "We discourage people from hanging around," said Silva. "But the new units have seating capacity and people like to hang around when they can sit down."

To combat this tendency, Castle workers try to encourage patrons to sit down, eat and leave. Families are encouraged to visit the Castle without making it their home.

Employees are usually too busy to chat with the customers, Silva adds.

"Our operators don't have time to encourage them by talking continually," Silva said of loiterers.

NEW CASTLES, like the one in Canton not only are equipped with a dining area but have full basements as well, containing washers and dryers for uniforms.

That's a far cry from the early days of the company when the owners couldn't get long-term leases for the small amount of property their buildings needed.

To solve this little snag, the owners devised a portable castle. The last one in the Detroit area was moved to its present spot on Fort and White in Lincoln Park from Melvindale, several years ago.

Behind those now-stationary counters are employees who work 37½ hours a week at a starting salary of about \$2.75 an hour.

"That [salary] varies because I change it once or twice a year depending on the conditions of the year we're working in," said Silva.

The wage scale varies according to position but all employees get a chance to participate in the company's profit sharing program and benefits.

"Our overall packaging is based on locality," said Silva, who started flipping White Castle burgers 32 years ago. "People can work themselves up in this business."

With 11 burger palaces in the area to guard, Silva is eyeing Roseville as the next spot for a Castle.

Troy is another possible location, but Farmington will have to wait for its own set of porcelain turrets. There isn't a spot of land zoned large enough in the area to support a Castle.



Frank Silva walks through one of the cavernous freezers which hold frozen hamburger patties. (Staff photo by Harry Mauthe)

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