

# The Inside Track



A Los Angeleno foodie navigates the California burger chain as it prepares to invade North Texas

**f**ort Worth is a frontier town once again. Only now, it's an Eastern frontier. When the In-N-Out Burger opens on West 7th Street early this summer, it will be the farthest-flung outlet of the growing, near-legendary California fast-food chain (a Dallas INOB is nearing completion). In a city that certainly has its share of hotly debated "best

burgers," In-N-Out could upset the balance of beef all over again.

Why all the fuss? Take it from this Los Angeleno: While the California fast-food tradition, a lineage that dates back at least to the first McDonald's in San Bernardino, continually tops itself — most recently with the quality-focused chains The Habit, The Counter and

Smashburger (also new to Fort Worth) — no chain could possibly have higher customer loyalty than In-N-Out. On its surface, the appeal comes down to three elements:

- Fresh ingredients (meat ground daily and cooked to order — no freezers or microwaves — and Kennebec potatoes cut in front of your eyes and french fried in 100-percent vegetable oil)
- Friendly service (the red-aproned army behind the counters is said to be paid better than any other fast-food workers)
- Simplicity: a menu of burgers, fries, shakes and sodas; that's right, no chicken, no fish filets, no breakfasts and definitely no salads

But beyond that are hidden details that make devotees feel as if they're in an exclusive club. Since the Baldwin Park, Calif.-based chain began in 1948 as the first modern-style drive-thru, the family-owned business has acquired a "secret" unposted menu of additions and variations invented by various anonymous customers over the years, a factor that makes special ordering almost a requirement. The simplest is to add more patties and cheese to the double cheeseburger, upgrading a 2X2 to a 3X3 or even 4X4 (some fanatics in Las Vegas actually ordered a 100X100 a few years back). Probably the best known is protein style (a '70s-era innovation since adapted at many other places), substituting a lettuce wrap for bun. There are also "veggie" burgers and grilled cheese sandwiches sans meat.

Even within the secret menu, there are some mysteries. For example, Animal-Style fries, appropriately named, feature melted American cheese, near-blackened onions and globs of

thick secret sauce, an acquired taste I've nicknamed Pacoima Poutine. But an Animal-Style burger is entirely different: a mustard-fried patty, extra pickles, savory near-compote onions bringing the standard toasted bun, crispy lettuce, sauce and ripe tomato to a higher plane of burger bliss. Want Animal-Style fries inside the burger? Well, that's called Monkey Style or Gorilla Style. Even more curious is the Flying Dutchman, a straight-up combo of nothing but meat and cheese, for some reason named in tribute to the 18th-century ghost ship legend. (Does the sandwich promise purgatory?)

In the beverage category, the Neapolitan shake — a swirl of marshmallowy vanilla, chocolate and strawberry flavors — is more tweeny novelty than flavor explosion, though combining a vanilla shake and root beer to make a float sounds tasty enough, as does the half-lemonade/half-7Up Lemon Up.

You can also request your buns "extra-toasted," your fries "light" (barely cooked) or "well-done," add chopped jalapeños and request "no salt" on your burger (recommended — it allows the beef flavor to come through better).

Will the double-double erase all thoughts of the Dirty Love Burger (Love Shack), Diablo Burger (Fred's) or a cheeseburger at Kincaid's? Probably not. But the In-N-Out burger was rated best of the chains (7.9 out of 10) by readers of *Consumer Reports* in a recent survey (McDonald's was lowest), topping Five Guys, Fuddrucker's, Back Yard, Culver's, Whataburger, Krystal, Sonic, Wendy's and A&W. And even chefs as big as Wolfgang Puck have sung its praises. Consider yourself fortunate, Fort Worth. For once, Austin is jealous.

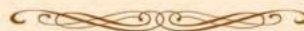
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