

O N E

The Hamburg-American Line



First, let's get one thing straight. The hamburger is an American invention. It doesn't matter that it is named after a German city. It doesn't matter if Mongols used to ride around with minced horsemeat under their saddles, on their way to some hamburger-fueled havoc in the thirteenth century. These and other historical factlets figure prominently in most informal histories of the hamburger, both in print and on the Web. But the hamburger matters precisely because it is a universally understood food, a compact icon that has resisted all centrifugal pressure as it has moved around the world. Everywhere you go, a hamburger means a ground beef patty served on a white enriched bun. Occasionally, middlebrows replace the bun with a kaiser roll or some other unorthodox support. Here and there minor variations like the Oklahoman onion burger or the Mississippian

slugburger appear and attain a local prominence. But the hamburger has resisted absorption nearly everywhere it goes, and a hundred years after its invention, it remains essentially the same object. Once that ground patty of browned beef was laid on a bun for the first time, the hamburger shimmered into existence philosophically. Because the burger has a kind of inevitability to it; it is a gastronomic endpoint, like sashimi or a baked potato. Its basic design cannot be improved upon.



It was a long time coming. The earliest reference to a proto-hamburger ancestor comes in 1763, in that year's edition of Hannah Glasse's *Art of Cookery, Made Plain and Easy*. This English cookbook describes a Hamburg sausage: "Take a pound of Beef, mince it very small, with half a Pound of the best Suet; then mix three Quarters of a Pound of Suet cut in large Pieces; then season it with Pepper, Cloves, Nutmeg, a great Quantity of Garlic cut small, some white Wine Vinegar, some Bay Salt, a Glass of red Wine, and one of Rum; mix all these very well together, then take the largest Gut you can find, stuff it very tight; then hang it up a Chimney, and smoke it with Saw-dust for a Week or ten Days; hang them in the Air, till they are dry, and they will keep a Year. They are very good boiled in Peas Porridge, and roasted with toasted Bread under it, or in an Amlet."¹

They may have been good in an amlet, but they obviously were not hamburgers. Glasse's recipe is the *Australopithecus* of the

hamburger family, a barely recognizable progenitor, primitive and inauspicious, but the missing link nonetheless—the earliest shared ancestor. And mark that last line: a sausage is far in spirit from a burger, and a beef sausage, roasted and served on toasted bread—that is something else again.

Hannah Glasse’s afterthought, however, was a rare glimpse into the future: the nineteenth century would be an era of Hamburg steaks, minced or scraped beefsteaks, usually taken from a tough economy cut like the round and jazzed up with onions and a little nutmeg. Some recipes call for an egg as a binder; others, thriftier, add in some form of starchy filler. A reliable home meat grinder wasn’t commonly available until the middle of the nineteenth century, so the home cooks of the period turned out something much closer to what we might call cube steak than a modern meat loaf, with its fine grain.² Like meat loaf, though, these were meant to be served with gravy. Most cookbooks of the nineteenth century contain some variation; by the time of Fannie Farmer’s definitive *Boston Cooking-School Cook Book* (1896), the recipe was considered so common that it hardly required elaboration. “Shape, cook, and serve as meat cakes,” the Martha Stewart of her time says laconically.³ Hamburg steak was old hat, even by then—déclassé, a staple item.

Given the dish’s provenance, it’s not surprising. In Hamburg, particularly in the nineteenth century (and even to some extent today) beef was commonly served minced or chopped, a dish supposedly picked up from the Russians (Tatars).⁴ Hamburg was

an important port city and one of the major embarkation points for emigrants headed for the United States. Often these migrants were German. Hamburg steak was for them as familiar as Texas chili or Boston clam chowder, and about as prestigious. Cheap and nourishing and cooked up in a gratifying bath of butter, Hamburg steak was exactly the kind of street food you might expect to find in a port city where bustling people eat standing up. New York City was, even in colonial times, famously busy, and although restaurants per se were few, an ad hoc array of oyster stands, cookshops, coffeehouses, and freestanding food vendors accommodated local tastes. When the first real restaurants appeared, it was inevitable that hamburger steak would be present. Everyone liked it, for one thing; for another, it allowed for a big retail markup. Delmonico's, whose first printed menu appeared in 1837, lists the hamburger steak as its most expensive item at ten cents, twice the price of roast beef, pork chops, or a veal cutlet. Ten cents for a hamburger steak? The gravy train was rolling even then.

Interestingly, the chopped or minced or scraped Hamburg steak was itself a dressed-up version of a dish even lower on the culinary scale: salt beef. This makes sense on several levels. In the nineteenth century, fresh meat was a rarity in any city; this was the golden age of jerky, and an adulterated product like Hamburg steak is an obvious answer to the age-old dilemma of perishable meat. The recipe's English origin makes sense, too: obviously, people from Hamburg wouldn't call their own brand of

minced beefsteak Hamburg steak any more than a coffee shop in Dallas serves Texas chili. Culinary historians like Theodora Fitz-Gibbon, in her *Food of the Western World*, are therefore wrong, in assuming that the dish comes from Germany via the Hamburg-American Line. That route didn't start until 1847, and anyway, the waves of German immigrants who flooded to America in the 1850s, refugees from political turmoil, arrived in America to find Hamburg steak ready to greet them.

What was a Hamburg steak like, through its long prehistory? It's clear from almost all extant nineteenth-century recipes that the gnarly, semicured beef patty clutched in the fingers of starving immigrants soon gave way to something resembling what we would think of today as Salisbury steak—the familiar, deliciously inorganic Swanson frozen dinner, with the brown greasy gravy and a few grim, gray onions on top. The dish was popular: it shows up in nearly every cookbook from Mary Lincoln's *Boston Cooking School Cook Book* in 1844 onward. But Hamburg steak never ascended to the level of the hot dog, a staple item whose Germanic origin was soon forgotten. It never became “steak” or even “meat loaf”; it remained “Hamburg steak” until it retreated forever into tinfoil trays and a few fugitive, dismal Pennsylvania roadhouses.

Why not? Part of it can surely be ascribed to bad luck. Many foods have aspired to iconic status, and one cannot help but project a rueful, thwarted mood to such once-beloved standards as roast ox, suckling pig, fish sticks, oyster pan roasts, and the rest.

They started out so well. Everyone loved them, and yet they made hardly any impression on the twentieth century. If you could figure out why not, you might have a better bead on the fault lines between their time and ours. For example, it's obvious that in the case of roast oxen, suckling pigs, venison haunches, and to some extent even roast turkey, these animals were just too big to cook in an ordinary household kitchen. Either they were relics of a rural age and couldn't fit in an oven, or (in the case of turkey) were simply too big to feed an average urban family and so were relegated to ceremonial appearances, like a retired comedy star who comes out once a year to accept a lifetime achievement award. People in the twentieth century more and more tended to live in cities rather than in the country, as the 1920 census announced. It's hard to manage an ox or a litter of squealing pigs in a modern city.

Talk of pigs brings up a larger question. If one were taking bets, circa 1850, as to what would eventually become the iconic American food, only a Nostradamus could have predicted that it would be made of beef. Pork was the American meat par excellence, and it was consumed on such a scale, and with such voracious appetite, that visitors frequently commented on it: pork was the perfect American commodity meat in every way. Pigs, like the people who owned them, were independent and self-willed, and more or less took care of themselves, eating whatever happened to be around. Pigs are cheap to keep, and a good investment, too: in a time before effective overland transportation,

it cost too much to market corn, which weighs a lot in proportion to its value. But turn that corn into whiskey or pork, and now you have something that can bring cash into even the most remote economy. And most Americans lived in remote economies. Nor did this change if you lived in New York City right next door to Andrew Hamilton: cattle were a major investment, and you needed a lot of room and a lot of money to make them pay. (Cattle and capitalism are, not coincidentally, drawn from the same linguistic root, generative wealth being measured in herds for most of human history.) The economics of meat by the nineteenth century had long ago left sustenance farming far behind. The meat packers of Ohio, by midcentury, had “originated and perfected the system which packs 15 bushels of corn into a pig and packs that pig into a barrel, and sends him over the mountains and over the ocean to feed mankind.”⁵

Moreover, as anyone who ever ate beef jerky will attest, pork is infinitely superior to beef as a preserved meat. Bacon, sausage, ham, salt pork—these were the staple items, and in some cases, the only nourishment, of generations of rural Americans, enslaved and free. Pork, writes Richard Osborn Cummings, in *The American and His Food: A History of Food Habits in the United States* (1940), “actually improves as a result of preservative processes. . . . It is said that because of its flavor value, a pound of bacon goes as far as three pounds of beef-steak.”⁶

What changed in America was the opening of the Great Plains and the development of a massive meatpacking industry to ac-

commodate cattle. This is one area of American life in which capitalism and the myth of the frontier cohere. In the early Republic, the plains had been considered a dead zone, the Great American Desert. But those sparse grasslands were just right for feeding vast herds of cattle. Nobody needs to be told about the resulting moment in American history; our heroes have always been cowboys. “Ten years and I’ll have the Red River D on more cattle than you’ve looked at anywhere,” John Wayne says, squinting into the future in Howard Hawks’s *Red River* (1948). “I’ll have that brand on enough beef to feed the whole country. Good beef for hungry people. Beef to make ’em strong, make ’em grow.”

Though heavily mythologized, this wasn’t too far from the truth. And Wayne’s Tom Dunson is accurate in another way, too: he was in it for the money. Cowboys tamed the West, and cowboys were wage-earning functionaries employed by well-capitalized industrialists whose stated goal was to build mercantile empires. The inexorable western movement known as Manifest Destiny had as its object the acquisition of territory for Americans to live on, but the most active players in that movement were real estate speculators and others with commercial goals in mind, Babbitts rather than Bumpos. By the late nineteenth century, the opening of the vast, oceanic grasslands of the Great Plains to cattle ranching had made it possible for every American to enjoy beef more or less every day. In the 1880s dawned the Golden Age of Beef, when Gustavus Swift developed an infrastructure that linked Chicago’s vast meatropolis with the

East Coast via refrigerated railroad cars.⁷ For the first time these arterial lines carried fresh beef to cities overflowing with immigrant populations. Immigrants who liked to stretch a dollar, and make even newly cheap beef go a little bit farther. Immigrants who ate and bought a lot of Hamburg steak.

It was in cities, among the lower classes, that the Hamburg steak found its path to primacy. Pigs may have been okay for settlers in the rude woods. But modern America was to be urban, industrial, and capitalistic. It had workers to feed, and they wanted cheap and nourishing beef lunches. More important, it had a “beef trust” in place by the 1880s that controlled the burgeoning traffic from the Midwest to the cities of the East. The “beef trust” would come in for much public criticism early in the next century, when Upton Sinclair published *The Jungle*; but in the years of industrialization, the availability of beef to even the poorest workers was a feat of which many Americans were justly proud.

There was, and is, no symbol of bounty to compare to fresh beef. Americans followed their British forebears in regarding it as a peerless sign of health and prosperity.⁸ There was no question about its supremacy. “Instinctively most persons prefer beef, as an habitual article of diet, to any other variety of meat,” wrote Dr. Austin Flint confidently in 1866’s *Physiology of Man*.⁹ And the fact that America boasted so much of it was always an article of patriotic pride, long before beef was available to even the poorest city dwellers. Americans ate beef as a birthright. “Our chief article of food was beef,” boasted Richard Henry Dana earlier in

the century in *Two Years before the Mast* (1840). “What one man ate over a hearty man’s allowance would have made an English peasant’s heart leap in his mouth.”¹⁰

Hamburg steak was the cheapest way for the poorest Americans to eat beef. It was the rock-bottom entry point to the American beef dream. And as such, it contains the essence of the hamburger story. Hamburgers don’t taste better than beefsteaks, nor are they more native to these shores than a hundred other favorite dishes, from burgoo to barbecue. They are popular because they are made of the substance all people love most, if Dr. Flint is to be believed, and available everywhere in more or less the same form for very little cash. There is an inevitability to the hamburger: it is the most concentrated way a person can cheaply eat everything that people like about beef. As food historian Elisabeth Rozin has written with lyrical precision, “The meaning of the burger is as a kind of common denominator of the beef experience, with all the flavor, aroma, tenderness, and juiciness in a cheap and accessible form. The meatiness, the beefiness, the succulence of the fat are all there in that unassuming patty. For perhaps the first time ever, the hunger for all that beef represents, [could] easily be satisfied, available to almost anyone.”¹¹

But not yet. The hamburger dream was still mired in the chaos of the nineteenth century. Here was an immigrant dish whose origin nobody was sure of, whose preparation varied from cook to cook, that was unwieldy to eat and complicated to prepare, with its elaborate requirements of grinding or scraping or minc-

ing and folding in minced onions, that required a greasy pan gravy, and a fork and knife to eat, not to mention a plate, which then required a table and chair, and, like its closest living descendant, meat loaf, had to be served cooked all the way through.

None of that mattered, of course, if you were making it at home. But dishes don't become iconic by being served at the dinner table. Totems exist in the public space. And until the Hamburg steak could be standardized, commercialized, and exploited for profit by Americans everywhere, it would never become the universal American food. It would eventually get its Edisons and Fords, but the path this strange "meat cake" took through what historian Robert Wiebe has called America's "search for order" remains a strange one.¹² That it finally arrived, on a bun and called by its proper name, by the early twentieth century, is certain. But what a long and twisted route it took!



This being a history of the hamburger, it's necessary to try to sort out who made the first one. There are a number of rival claims, but they're all equally worthless, historically speaking. None can produce any real evidence. Still, none seem to be made of whole cloth, and the earliest claim, of 1885, is recent enough not to strain credulity. It comes on behalf of a Seymour, Wisconsin, teenager named Charlie Nagreen who may or may not have put a meatball between two slices of bread and sold it as a sandwich from his ox-drawn cart at the Outagamie County Fair that year.