



## YOUNG & HUNGRY

# Game On: Thunder Burger's Ryan Fichter Serves Kangaroo And Other Wild Meats

Posted by **Chris Shott** on Jul. 20, 2011 at 6:05 pm



A few years ago, **Ryan Fichter** was flipping through a copy of *Maxim* when he saw an article about eating wild game. He was particularly interested in the part about lion meat. It turned out that any schlub living outside of sub-Saharan Africa could order the stuff online: The king of the jungle, dethroned, deboned, and delivered straight to your door.

Fichter doesn't recall the name of the cover model from that particular issue. "Someone hotter than I am," he says. But he hasn't forgotten about the lion. Consider it a different type of carnal desire.

"I definitely am curious," says Fichter. "I've never eaten it. But I've seen it on the Internet."

You know the saying about curiosity and the cat. In Fichter's case, the cat was already dead when the curiosity started to kill. When the 32-year-old chef at Georgetown's **Thunder Burger** suggested he might serve Simba steaks, animal rights activists pounced. Fichter scampered away from the lion idea—but not from the exotic-meat specials that have become his year-old restaurant's defining attraction.

Located in a part of town rarely cited for its culinary imagination, Thunder Burger isn't your typical burger joint. Beyond the usual choice of beef, turkey or veggie patty, diners can also opt for wild boar, topped with Havarti cheese and pineapple salsa, or an elk burger, ground with herbs and mustard seed, garnished with tomato and rémoulade. Mere blocks from the touristy lines outside **Georgetown Cupcake**, the restaurant's wild fare lends the place a sort of rustic feel—even if the menu also includes a gourmet cheese plate and the punky décor recalls the retail chain Hot Topic. "We try to break the mold," says Fichter.

On a recent Wednesday evening, the restaurant also featured a special on kangaroo sliders: two palm-sized patties of marsupial meat, grilled medium rare, glazed with teriyaki sauce, topped with lettuce and served on sesame seed buns. While I found the tiny burgers a bit over-sauced, the meat was perfectly red and juicy on the inside. It reminded me of venison in terms of flavor. Another diner likened it to liver.

According to Fichter, we're both right: "Very, very venison-like. I was thinking more of a buffalo liver, or chicken liver kind of

taste, or even venison liver. It's very pungent, very rich in albumin." And another thing about Australia's most famous hopping animal: "It's super lean," the chef says, "and full of protein."

The kangaroo's debut was the third installment in an ongoing series at the restaurant, called "Wild Wednesdays," where Fichter prepares a different type of game each week. The first night, the chef whipped up a batch of beer-braised alligator ribs. The following week, he made ostrich burgers topped with fig and elderberry jam.

As we chat, Fichter explains plans for his next trick: turtle poppers. "This is going to be like a hush puppy," he explains. "It's going to have a little cheese and jalapeno, a little cornmeal and onions in there with the turtle meat, and those will be fried crispy. I haven't quite figured out the sauce yet. I'm thinking maybe a curry sauce."

Down the line, Fichter also wants to make something with rattlesnake—exactly what, he hasn't yet figured out. "It's tough because I don't know quite how to serve that to people," he says. "There's cartilage involved. It's kind of like eating an eel almost. Trying to find a form that's diner-friendly is the challenge with rattlesnake right now."

Fichter grew up in Columbia, Md. The son of an organic chemist, he came to cooking quite naturally. "Cooking and chemistry—they're basically the same thing," he says. "Only with cooking, you can actually lick the spoon." At 15, he bussed tables at the local Clyde's location before eventually finagling his way into the kitchen. He later attended New York's venerable Culinary Institute of America.



By the time Fichter was hired to helm the kitchen at Thunder Burger last year, he was pretty well-versed in preparing atypical proteins. At the former **Maxim**, a Russian-themed restaurant on F Street NW, he'd made black bear stew and roasted bear loin. He'd also spent time in Hawaii, where he hunted wild boar—"they're like rats out there," he says—and learned how to cook the critters in an earthen oven, stuffed with salt and buried under banana leaves.

A fan of **Andrew Zimmern**, host of the Travel Channel's *Bizarre Foods*, Fichter cites a Filipino dish of goat cooked in bile as the weirdest thing he's ever put into his mouth. "It looks horrible—like scrambled green eggs," he says of the dish, which he sampled in Hawaii. "But the taste, it's different, man."

The genesis of Wild Wednesdays likely derives from a phenomenon that's closer to home: D.C.'s oversupply of gourmet burger joints. In a market saturated with prime beef emporia including **BGR: The Burger Joint**, **Black & Orange**, and **Ray's Hell Burger**, Fichter and his bosses were looking for something different, especially on slower nights. They'd considered all the usual gimmicks: Twenty-cent wing night? Twenty-some other places already do that. Taco Tuesday? Quite trite, too.

"I was just like, 'Why don't we do wild game night or something and focus on different types of wild game?,' Fichter says. "People can talk about it. It's something that no one else is doing."

It took a few subsequent meetings, but the restaurant's owners eventually signed off on the concept.

To help publicize the weekly promotion, Fichter did interviews with food writers, hyping all the various creatures he hoped to skewer. He mentioned antelope. He mentioned bear. He also mentioned zebra and lion. And that's where the young chef stepped in it.

Animal-rights activists howled. "All of them were just in an uproar about the lion," Fichter says.

One group, in particular, raised a fuss: the International Fund for Animal Welfare, which has been lobbying the U.S. government to list the African lion as endangered. Its local director, **Jeffrey Flocken**, denounced Fichter's promotion as "deeply troublesome."

Fichter now claims his comments were misconstrued. He says he was specifically referring to the wide array of animals available from a particular purveyor of game meats in northern California: "I was basically trying to elaborate on how many different things this guy has and are available and show the diversity of the things that I can and could be able to do." He insists, "I've never served [lion] and don't intend to serve it or any other endangered species."

But even if he did decide to dish out some lion, Fichter contends that the ethical points raised by critics are moot. The lion he mentioned comes from a farm regulated by the federal government. As far as he knows, no one is poaching the vulnerable animals from the African savanna in order to put meat on your plate. "This guy, he's raising these animals by USDA standards for human consumption," Fichter says. "If it was such a problem, the USDA, being the big government entity that they are, would take these animals back from them and reintroduce them to the wild."

Nonetheless, restaurant brass responded with a definitive pledge, posted on the Thunder Burger web site: "no feline, canine, or equine" meats in future promotions.

The controversy didn't seem to detract from sales. On the Wednesday immediately following the dust-up, Fichter sold out of all 32 portions of kangaroo sliders that he prepared for that week.

Following the no-feline pledge, even a few animal advocates dropped by to express their gratitude. "One person had a turkey burger," Fichter says. "They didn't try the kangaroo."

*Photo by Darrow Montgomery*

*Thunder Burger, 3056 M St. NW, (202) 333-2888*

*Eatery tips? Food pursuits? Send suggestions to [hungry@washingtoncitypaper.com](mailto:hungry@washingtoncitypaper.com).*

#### Comments

- Scott**  
July 21st, 2011  
5:30 pm #1
- I think this is very refreshing, whilst a traditional beef or pork burger laden with bbq sauce and bacon type goodies is great - i agree with Ryan Fichter, there are plenty more meats that can be used in a burger, here in the UK we do not have the pleasure of the quantity of game you have in the states, i am now tempted to use our burger press with some venison or ostrich - maybe even rabbit!
- Maria**  
July 22nd, 2011  
1:32 pm #2
- I think this CHEF needs some classes in BUSINESS ETHICS... What is true is that he has gained The most vigorous enemies to be against him: all the animal lovers. With a Little and Well deserved RESPECT for our wild especies he could have been known for either how good or bad he was instead of being known for not caring and overstepping over the morale and ethics of millions of americans.... Just to feed his ego!!!
- Mike Licht**  
July 23rd, 2011  
1:14 pm #3
- Imported kangaroo or domestic? Locovores want to know.
- Hawk Jones**  
July 23rd, 2011  
3:21 pm #4
- Ryan is the man!!! We used to work together in Hawaii, he truly is a gentleman and a great guy aside from being an amazing chef. All the success to your establishment Ryan, they are extremely lucky to have you.
- DD**  
July 24th, 2011  
8:41 pm #5
- Second that question on kangaroo meat - we're fascinated by the thought of a local kangaroo farm.
- Chef Fichter**  
July 26th, 2011  
11:12 am #6
- Our kangaroo is domestic. It comes to us from Durham Ranch in Gillette, Wyoming.
- keisha kole**  
July 26th, 2011  
10:13 pm #7
- i want some kangaroo burgers fried in poop  
can he make that?  
<http://ethicalfutures.wordpress.com>

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