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HAVING WORDS WITH Madeline Poley

OWNER,
NEW YORK BURGER CO.

For more than 25 years Madeline Poley has understood the idea that serving the freshest, best ingredients often is perceived as cutting-edge cuisine — even if that cuisine comes in the form of a quick-service hamburger.

The co-owner and creator of several fine-dining, catering and fast-food establishments now is preparing to grow her latest concept, New York Burger Co., a two-unit, gourmet quick-service burger outlet in lower Manhattan. She plans to franchise this year.

Poley said she doesn't have to serve platefuls of *pâté* to showcase her love of gastronomy. With her burger concept, she gets to share it with the masses.

How did you go from working in fine dining to operating a quick-service business?

After 11 years in the restaurant business, I was a total burnout. We did the French tradition of closing down in August for vacation, but it finally all became too much, so we decided to close [our restaurant]. I continued catering for very high-end clients and did consulting work, developing concepts for other people. I always thought there was a hole in fast food back in the late '80s and early '90s; there just wasn't anything really interesting happening in that world. I always believed quick-serve customers would pay more for interesting, good food.

How did New York Burger Co. start?

My friend, Charles Morris Mount, who was a restaurant designer, introduced me to my present partner, Spiros Zisimatos. I was working with Charles on a concept called The American Burger, which offered high-quality burgers on designer buns in a fast-food environment. That restaurant was the precursor to New York Burger Co., which I believed was a great idea because everyone loves great burgers. I asked Spiros if he wanted to take the [new] concept forward with me. I was ready to put my name on something, but it took several years to develop. We finally opened in June 2004.



How do you explain its success?

Because of my culinary background, the point was to make our own products, sauces and dressings in-house, using the best ingredients possible. It took several months to build the first store, but once it was open we thought the location on Park Avenue South would really appeal to young professionals. We thought that was our demographic, but found it was broader than that. It appealed to students and housewives and out-of-towners, too. We use chuck rolls, no trimmings. It's definitely the same quality of beef you'd find at a sit-down restaurant for \$12 or \$15.

Have burgers always been this popular?

No one ever seems to get bored with burgers. I think they're the original American comfort food, and they certainly seem to have universal appeal. It's the same as what the Italians did for pizza. Theoretically, burgers came from Hamburg, Germany, but they were developed in American hands. It's all about buying good, quality beef and grilling it properly. The rest is up to you.

Why do you think so many upscale chefs are now opening burger concepts?

I think it has a lot to do with the economy. With New York real-estate prices, it's not easy building a mega restaurant. But burgers and pizzas will always stay popular. People want something that appeals to their sophisticated palates but is affordable.

— Elissa Elan

FAST FACTS

HOMETOWN: New York
EXPERIENCE: co-owner of the Chelsea Charcuterie, renamed the Soho Charcuterie and Restaurant in the 1970s; created the American Burger Co. concept in the late 1990s and its successor, the New York Burger Co., in 2004
EDUCATION: bachelor's degree from Columbia University, New York