

You want eco-friendly with that?



John Lettieri, president and founder of Hero Certified Burgers.

Tim Fraser/National Post

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Correction: The article below initially mis-stated the number of South St. Burger Co. locations, it has been updated.

Some would argue that other than the occasional lettuce leaf on your hamburger, fast food and the green movement don't mix. Jay Gould and John Lettieri are among a rising group of fast food purists setting out to prove otherwise.

Both of these seasoned franchise operators - Mr. Gould is the president of New York Fries and South St. Burger Co. franchises, Mr. Lettieri is the owner of the Lettieri cafés chain in Toronto and the inspiration behind Hero Certified Burgers -are showing the foodservice world that even when you're dishing up burgers and fries, you can do it with a social conscience.

When Mr. Gould launched South St. Burger Co. in 2005, he was the first to admit that the last thing the fast-food business needed was another burger joint. But a growing clientele eager to find fast foods with less guilt in the pleasure proved him wrong. There are now 14 South St. Burger locations, mostly in the greater Toronto area and one in Calgary, with more on the drawing board. "By 2012 we'll be north of 20 stores."

His inclination to healthier options shouldn't come as a surprise. In 1977, at the age of 21, he and his brother Hal opened the first Cultures location in London, Ont. "At the time we were the only fastfood operation into salads and sandwiches," he says.

But, Mr. Gould says, even if you're selling the much-maligned burger and fries, there's a right way to do it. "[They] may be clobbered in the press, but at the end of the day, people still want them -they're just choosier. I believe you can sell fast food that tastes good and is top quality. For example, we use sunflower oil for our fries, antibiotic and hormonefree meats, have taken the salt out of the gravy and cut back on portion sizes."

Mr. Lettieri was in a similar frame of mind when he opened his first Hero restaurant in Hazelton Lanes in 2004. Now he has 22 locations with plans to build another five in the greater Toronto area. He also has a hankering to explore opportunities in Western Canada. "There's definitely a market for a premium, hormone-free, antibiotic-free burger."

In his quest to create the healthiest burger, Mr. Lettieri searched far and wide, finally landing on Heritage Angus Beef, a group of ranchers in Rycroft, Alta., a mile south of the Alaska Highway. "It took a few years, but we finally found specialized ranchers in Canada that were in the business of raising cattle with all the attributes we wanted. With Heritage we have complete traceability . down to how the cattle are raised,

treated and fed."

Christoph Weder, chief executive and director of marketing for Heritage Angus Beef, says it took only two days from the first telephone call for Mr. Lettieri to get on a plane to check out the ranch. A few days later, an exclusive supply deal was sealed. "It turned out to be a great fit. John was trying to have an upscale burger with really good ingredients and a good story behind it. We have that. We practice an environmentally sustainable agricultural model, and use a fair trade model for our producers."

Mr. Weder, who is also the official rancher contact on the Hero site, answering emails to customers' questions, says he hears from customers three or four times a week.

While Heritage supplies a number of foodservice operations, Hero is the only chain, Mr. Weder says. "One of my favourite comments is from Warren Buffett when he talked about innovators, imitators and idiots. John is definitely an innovator. Now the imitators are coming in and phoning that they want to do a natural burger. The revitalization of the burger has been unreal!"

Mr. Gould and Mr. Lettieri will both tell you social responsibility is much more than the meat they use. It also means doing the right thing when it comes to the packaging and store operations.

Hero Certified Burgers, for example, is the first Canadian chain to use a revolutionary form of packaging from GreenDustries Packaging for all its products. The new pleated packaging reduces paper waste by 35% to 70% and is made from 100% recycled paper. It's so special, Hero gave it its own page on the website.

"It won a packaging-of-the-year award," says Mr. Lettieri, who admits the journey to find the most eco-friendly packaging was a lengthy one. "And we're the only ones who have it," he says.

"We're also the only ones to offer a gluten-free burger."

At South Street Burger, sustainability extends to the store design, where Mr. Gould pulled out all the stops to ensure energy and water consumption, lighting and ventilation systems were all environmentally friendly. He says that includes advanced initiatives such as a unique heat exchange ventilation system, air cooled ice machines, high-efficiency fryers and LED lighting. Where possible, he explores options such as solar and renewable electricity suppliers; and every site uses reclaimed wood, non-toxic cleaning products and postconsumable recycled paper products.

Those efforts have received international recognition: The Don Mills South St. Burger location received a 2011 Special Recognition Award for Innovation in Energy from the Association for Retail Environments, an international not-for-profit organization dedicated to advancing the retail environment industry.

"Jay took the New York Fries 'do one thing and do it very well' philosophy and applied it to everything, from food to store design," says Eric Boulden, principal and LEED® green associate with Jump Branding & Design Inc. in Toronto, who has been working with Mr. Gould on the South St. Burger concept since its inception.

"Like most entrepreneurs, Jay has a definite vision. He saw the need in the fast-food casual dining industry for a quality player with a conscience. He was willing to do it for all the right reasons. Most would say that every businessman would want that. Yes they do. But they don't always stick to it. . Jay always keeps the prize in mind."

"A lot of us in the business would like to do it because customers depend on us to do the right thing," Mr. Gould says. "They want to know we're participating and doing our bit."

The focus on improvement never ends, he adds. "We try to get better with each store we open, but you have to take the time to ferret this stuff out."

"It's always a work in progress," Mr. Lettieri agrees. "We're constantly looking for things that help the environment and the consumption of food. And if you can deliver quality food at a fair price, there's a customer out there."

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