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Burgerville (Vancouver)

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Second-generation Vancouver restaurateur George Propstra, the son of a Dutch immigrant, opened the first Burgerville USA on March 10, 1961. By 2008, the Vancouver-based fast-food chain had grown to 39 stores, from Albany, Oregon, to Centralia, Washington, and east to The Dalles, Oregon, with visions of moving into the Seattle market by 2011. In a commercial sense, the opening of the first Burgerville, on Vancouver's McLoughlin Heights underscored the line in President John F. Kennedy's inauguration speech seven weeks earlier that "the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans." The new eatery, with a simple, easy-on-the-wallet menu and little waiting time, was immediately popular with teenagers and signaled that Baby Boomers would be a substantial customer base for the fast-food industry.

That original Burgerville, where customers ordered from an outside window and all food was "to go," offered no-frills burgers for 19 cents and its "Colossal Burger" for 39 cents. It was replaced on an adjacent lot in 1975 with a larger store offering inside seating and a drive-up window. Today, the oldest, continuously operated store in the chain is the second Burgerville, which opened in 1962 across the street from Vancouver's present-day City Hall. It is today (2008) the only Burgerville without inside seating. Just three blocks from Interstate 5, its clientele ranges from attorneys and city workers to freeway travelers, kids on bikes, and panhandlers who have scored donations from motorists waiting for a green light at the bottom of the I-5 off-ramp.

Taking on the Giants

Burgerville has survived and thrived against national giants such as Burger King and McDonald's by going upscale, with Northwest ingredients such as Tillamook cheese, only Northwest natural beef (no hormones, no antibiotics), and halibut fish and chips. Seasonal specialties include Walla Walla Sweet onion rings, strawberry shortcake, and raspberry and blackberry sundaes and shakes made with real ice cream.

As the Burgerville chain expanded, with many outlets in Portland and its suburbs, George Propstra became something of a burger cult figure for his dry-humor television ads. In one, the gravel-voiced Propstra, who was in his late 60s, went to a truck stop at Biggs Junction, Oregon, "to poke fun at competitors' frozen beef patties ostensibly trucked into the Northwest. He banged a frozen patty against the back of a semitrailer and said something like, 'If it's not Burgerville, you don't know where that meat has been'" (*The Columbian* editorial).

Propstra retired in 1992 and died in 2004. He was succeeded by his son-in-law, Tom Mears. More than 95 percent of the stock is in Mears-family hands.

Jack Graves, who has been with the company for nearly 30 years and carries the title, "chief cultural officer," says one of the major pivot

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Burgerville USA, Vancouver, 1961
Courtesy Burgerville

points in Burgerville's growth came in the early 1990s. Competition for the fast-food dollar was on the rise, with Jack In the Box, Carl's Jr. and taco places joining the fray along with Burger King, Wendy's, and McDonald's. In addition to this expanding array of restaurant choices, customers were the beneficiaries of hamburger price wars among the national chains. In some Burgerville stores, Graves says, year-over-year customer counts not only couldn't keep pace with earlier increases but actually slipped in raw numbers (Gregg Herrington interview with Graves).

"We couldn't compete on price with the national chains and their economies of scale," Graves says. So, "We looked at a shift in how we do business. We realized we had to play to our strength and play up the local and seasonal ingredients. Our menu shifted almost overnight, with a focus on bigger burgers, Tillamook cheese, and Northwest berries in our shakes" (Herrington interview with Graves).

Retro-Remodel

With Tom Mears' ascension to the presidency in 1992, Burgerville's transition included not only an upgrading of the menu and ingredients but also a shift in interior design to a "retro look." Reminiscent of the 1950s, the stores included jukeboxes with songs going back to the early rock 'n' roll era. The retrofitting cost the company \$8 million by 2000 when all remodels were completed. Together, says Graves, the changes "turned the company around" (Herrington interview with Graves).

Although the company has not expanded its geographic footprint in years, that could change soon. "The Seattle area is a natural," Graves says. "We definitely have our sights on Seattle," with a goal of four or five outlets there by 2011 (Herrington interview with Graves).

Sustainability and Employee Benefits

In recent years, Burgerville has emphasized sustainable practices. It buys wind-power credits equal to all of the energy it uses in its stores, sells its waste grease for conversion to bio-diesel fuel, and sells its much of its food waste for composting. In 2002, Burgerville began purchasing all of its beef through a single provider, Oregon-based Country Natural Beef, which is certified by Food Alliance, a nonprofit organization that "closely monitors its various suppliers to ensure no hormones or antibiotics are used and that it tracks the beef through the entire process."

Burgerville's mission statement is, "Serve with love." That spirit was captured by Arlo Kilpatrick, who retired from the company in 1996 after 34 years and was "as responsible for Burgerville's success as I am," George Propstra said at the time. Kilpatrick said then, "This business is almost more about people and involvement in the community than it is about making a buck" (Oppegaard, *The Columbian*).

Graves says the national average turnover rate for hourly workers in the fast-food industry is 150 percent per year and Burgerville's was 128 percent as recently as 2005. That's when the company offered hourly employees who work at least 20 hours a week and had at least six months on the job a medical-insurance package for \$15 a month, with no deductible. In 2006, that annual turnover rate fell to 54 percent. "The value is clearly there," Graves says. "We have happier workers and they give better service," including hotter food and cleaner restaurants. "The plan paid for itself," he says. "Our guest counts have improved" (Herrington interview with Graves).

The Holland

Burgerville's parent company is The Holland Inc., a name that honors the native country of George Propstra's father, Jacob. He founded the Holland Creamery in Vancouver in 1922 on Main Street, three blocks

north of the Columbia River. In 1927, he moved his growing business in milk, butter, eggs, and ice cream 15 blocks north to larger quarters. Holland ice cream, in distinctive cartons with images of windmills, was distributed through local grocery stores well into the 1950s. But back in the early 1930s Jacob Propstra had begun selling sandwiches at the creamery and in 1935, his son George left college to take over -- and expand -- that side of the business.

The creamery eventually closed, but The Holland restaurant became a Vancouver institution -- a reliable, clean, well-staffed, moderately priced full-service restaurant. It attracted a cross-section of loyal patrons for more than six decades: contractors, business and civic leaders at breakfast; downtown office workers and retirees at noon, and families and couples at dinner. There was a nighttime crowd, too. After sports events, concerts or drama productions at either of the two close-in high schools, (Hudson's Bay and the old Fort Vancouver) and after movies at downtown theaters there was a "rush" at the Holland for pie and ice cream.

But Vancouver demographics changed and the county's economic center shifted to the suburbs. The Holland cut back its evening hours, then began closing at mid-afternoon and finally, in July 2001, closed for good. George Propstra, retired by then, had begun devoting his energy and money to the community as a whole. He gave generously to all manner of civic and educational projects. A plaza in Esther Short Park in downtown Vancouver, the oldest public square in Washington state, is named for George Propstra.

Sources:

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By Gregg Herrington, September 30, 2008

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