

Best Hamburger In Austin Part 18: Hill-Bert's Burgers

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That \$5.61 I'll never get back

Hill-Bert's Burgers website trumpets accolades from Texas Monthly, Austin Chronicle and KXAN. "...Mmmm, a few bites of burger heaven"....and "...a legend" so when business carried us to north Austin recently we decided to forego a visit to Top Notch and take the measure of "the legend."

Legends fall.

Things are not well in the kingdom that Hilbert Maldonado began building 40 years ago in 1973. Walking into the spotless, brightly lit, re-purposed Taco Bell, the smell is divine. Hot grease, potatoes and beef are singing a clarion song.

The shaggy-headed order man is congenial, and at just north of five bucks the price is certainly right, but things career downhill once the food makes its way to table.

A requested side of mayo for proper french fry dipping is met by a couple packets of the cheapest mayo-type product on the market. It's always a bad sign when a restaurant shaves pennies off food cost by going bargain basement on condiments. A good sauce can make or break the humble hamburger and Hill-Bert's bottom-feeds with corn syrup based "mayo."

How are the fries?

Freezer bag fries come in a variety of grades. There's a well defined scoring system in place in the industry with Extra Long Fancy being the king of the freezer truck.

If the burger restaurant owner doesn't have the wherewithal to house-cut his potatoes he can still source respectable french fries from giant, commercial concerns, and thusly do a good job feeding his patrons.

Hill-Bert's Burgers is negligent in this all important category. The fries are skimpy, oddly shaped and clearly bottom of the barrel in quality. The kicker is that Extra Long and Fancy has greater case yield so your bottom line sees higher profits by spending a few extra bucks and getting in the good potatoes. Not to mention short commercial fries drink more of your fryer oil so you end up with higher food cost.

Short-sighted, Mr. Maldonado.

The burger.

Served at room temperature it misses the mark entirely. The beef has a decent, broiled flavor, and it only took 5 minutes to make the trip from the kitchen, but it's neither hot nor warm; it's as though it was sitting on a counter in the back somewhere and the cook said "oh fuck it, let's just ship this ol thing out and get rid of it."

Forty years is a long time in the restaurant industry. Hilbert Maldonado was steamrolled out of his original, 1973 location on Lamar Blvd when his lease came up in 2008. P. Terry's, the deep-pocketed, local chain bulldozed the original Hill-Bert's and built a retro burger house that echoed the very structure that came before it.

Hill-Bert's responded by moving a few blocks west into yet another re-purposed Taco Bell. There are now 3 Maldonado owned locations of the tiny chain; all in former Taco Bells. There may be variance in food quality between the 3 locations and I certainly hope so as the food at the

shop on North Burnet is a dismal take on the classic burger house format still ably vended at places like Jim's and Fran's.
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