



Burger King's Impossible Whopper and Popeye's Crispy Chicken Sandwich.

Across enemy lines

Dipping a toe in the fast-food sandwich wars

Where were you during the sandwich war?

I was parked in the drive-thru of Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen on Mangrove Avenue, where the party was going off at 8 p.m. last Wednesday night. The line of cars was at a standstill, and the parking lot and restaurant were just as jammed. Someone behind me rolled down a window to let their speakers release some bowel-rattling bass; and someone behind them rolled a fat one and let loose a cloud of smoke that lingered in the still air.

We were all waiting for the \$3.99 crispy chicken sandwich.

Actually, sandwich wars is more accurate. American soil has been home to not one, but two overhyped fast-food battles this summer: Popeyes' crispy chicken sandwich vs. Chick-fil-A's chicken sandwich, and Burger King's Impossible Whopper vs. everyone else's meatless options.

The triggering event for the war of the chickens was a Twitter beef between the two restaurants that caused internet observers to lose their minds and—in an effort to compare the newcomer's version to Chick-fil-A's—line up at Popeyes around the country and order crispy chicken sandwiches until they ran out two weeks later. (The restaurant's website features an image of an empty sandwich wrapper with the words: "Chicken sandwich ... be right back.")

And Burger King's bold move has put it way ahead of McDonald's and most of the rest of its main competitors in the race to bring an appealing vegetarian option to a fast-food restaurant. With the roll out of Impossible Foods' Impossible Burger 2.0—the plant-based patty that uses genetically engineered yeast to "beef up" soy-based heme (a molecule also found in abundance in beef)—earlier this year, the fast-food giant introduced meatless Whoppers nationwide at the beginning of August. (Carl's Jr. already had a less-hyped burger made with Beyond Meat that it debuted earlier in the year, and last week Kentucky Fried Chicken sold out of Beyond Meat chicken nuggets during a test run at an Atlanta location.)

So, even though I usually stay away from fast food,

all the buzz was too much for me to resist. I ventured out last week to taste what the fuss was all about.

First course was the Impossible Whopper (with no onions), which I purchased at the Burger King at the corner of Skyway and Notre Dame Boulevard. Tasted like a fast-food burger. Not much flavor other than the mayo. I dissected and inspected the "beef," squeezed it and was pleasantly surprised to see juices flow out. Tasted on its own, the patty was fine. The texture was beef-like, but there was little savoriness.

For comparison's sake, the beef Whopper is \$4.89 and has 660 calories, 40 grams fat, 12 grams saturated fat, 980 grams sodium and 28 grams protein, and the Impossible version is \$6.19 and has 630 calories, 34 grams fat, 11 grams saturated fat, 1080 grams sodium and 25 grams protein. If I were a vegetarian, the Impossible would be as passable of an option as anything else Burger King serves.

Second course, some fried chicken on bread. When I pulled into the Popeyes lot, I was taken aback. I did not expect it to be such a scene. As I made my way to the front door, a bedraggled Popeyes worker shuffled into the parking lot for a brief break. "Whoa! I can't believe the drive-thru isn't backed up into the parking lot," she said as she opened her car door to retrieve her smokes. She told me they'd been selling the new sandwiches nonstop—more than 1,000—since they opened at 10 a.m. She'd been there all day.

Inside, the line was almost to the door and the manager was strategizing with an employee how to fairly distribute the 22 sandwiches that remained. When she told her people to stop serving the dining room until she checked how many the drive-thru line was ordering, I bolted to my car and steered into the line in time to get one of the last ones.

And dang! With a fat, very juicy slab of breast meat inside an extra-crispy crust on a buttered, lightly toasted brioche bun, with mayo and a couple of large pickle slices, the sandwich was pretty great. Perfect really. And it was only \$3.99! It blows away the meek flaccid-patty, limp-pickle offering I had during one visit to a Texas Chick-fil-A. I will raise a rainbow flag in victory for Popeyes and count the days until the sandwich returns. □

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