

Lake County **RECORD-BEE**

Veggies with the Soul of a Burger

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The house made veggie burger at the Blue Wing Saloon. Dave Faries — Lake County Publishing

Gregory Sams had a problem.

The man credited with creating what we now call veggie burgers toyed with ingredients and recipes, but he struggled to find a point of reference. You see, Sams had never tried even a single bite of ground beef.

That was the early 1980s. A decade later, companies like Gardenburger and Boca joined the veggie burger market as demand soared.

Of course, that one nagging issue remains. Even for those familiar with the American staple, duplicating its flavor in vegetable form eludes many a dedicated chef.

At Blue Wing Saloon in Upper Lake, the kitchen crew decided imitation flatters neither the burger nor the dinner guest. Instead, they sought to capture its soul — the backyard grill, the

smoldering embers, the picnic table covered in checker cloth, the spirit of family and friends on a summer evening.

Somehow, in a patty formed from risotto, chickpeas, beets and black beans, they succeeded.

The restaurant's house made veggie burger has a rough-hewn swarthinness. It crackles from the grill, it's rustic crust scorched to a bittersweet edge — an acrid snap that awakens something husky and gruff in the patty.

Black beans provide an earthy rumble and richness that may not glisten like fatty beef, but lend heft — that fulfilling sensation of a backyard burger, glowering with blackened streaks. Shreds of red beets keep the burger from drifting too far toward the southwest, rooting the patty firmly in middle American nostalgia.

No, it cannot replace the traditional burger, at least for committed carnivores. But the Blue Wing veggie burger — which sits on house baked focaccia — doesn't try to match wits with the savor or texture of beef.

It only wants to evoke the memories, the character — that thing about a simple hamburger that we crave.

If only Blue Wing had been around in the 1980s, the restaurant's veggie burger may have solved Sams' dilemma.