



[Comments](#) 4 | [Recommend](#)  3

Dallas restaurateur now flips burguesas

12:00 AM CDT on Sunday, July 12, 2009

Jeff Sinelli is going for a three-peat. He wants to tackle the Hispanic hamburger market and hopes to have the same success he achieved with Genghis Grill, the Mongolian Stir Fry, and Which Wich, which serves custom-made sandwiches.

This 40-year-old, high-energy president of Sinelli Concepts Inc. isn't one to rest on his laurels.

The name of his new game is Burguesa Burger, launched on Cinco de Mayo. It features authentic Mexican hamburgers, or *hamburguesas* – meaning it puts a slice of ham on the burger.

"Pizza Patrón has the pizza. El Pollo Loco has the chicken. I just raised my hand and said, 'I'll do the hamburgers,'" Sinelli says in his company offices in the tunnel beneath Elm Street downtown.

His prototype is a 388-square-foot bright orange drive-through hut that makes a large storage unit look spacious.

Sinelli was driving his wife and newborn daughter home from the hospital last December when he spotted the tiny stand-alone in a shopping center parking lot on Inwood Road across from UT Southwestern University Hospital.

He couldn't help himself. He wheeled up to the hut, wrote down the phone number, called on the way home and had it under lease the next day.

Rent is a nominal \$1,200 a month. That's about what his daily sales are running. He's adding 40 patio seats with umbrellas.

So far, he's spent less than \$50,000 developing the concept, but he's packed 50 pounds onto his 6-foot -5-inch frame doing product research the last 18 months.

Sinelli is obsessive-compulsive in a mostly endearing way.

While vacationing with his wife in Argentina, Sinelli polished off 18 hamburgers in a single day before Courtney Sinelli put a stop to it.

"Like most things Jeff takes on, he did it at 150 percent," she says. "By that afternoon and I said, 'OK, you've had 18. Enough's enough.' "

Burguesa Burger's signature offering, *La Monumental*, is sort of a Big Mac gone south of the border: two all-beef patties, two slices of cheese, ham, avocado, lettuce, tomato, onion, refried beans, a tostada and special sauce on a Bimbo sesame seed bun. It's skewered with a jalapeño on top and costs \$5, or 75 pesos.

Sinelli is a big believer in made-to-order. ¿*Cuántas x Cuántas?* (How many by how many?) lets you build your burger by number of patties and cheese slices. So far, the biggest request has been for a four-by-four that cost \$7.50.

Drinks are sweetened with cane sugar: Mexican Coca-Cola in single-serve bottles and Burguesa's own line of fountain drinks. Coca-Cola Lite is available for those who insist on diet.

Fries are served in a cup with a fork so you can douse them with spicy sour cream sauce.

All of this should send doctors into cardiac arrest. But physicians walking over from UT Southwestern are among the regulars.

Hispanic market

So far, about a third of Burguesa Burger's customers are Hispanic.

Mexican native Pablo Gallegos, who has worked for Sinelli for 15 years, is manning the hut and keeping his boss true to the Hispanic mission.

"I use him as a filter," Sinelli says. "How much purer can you get than someone born and raised in Chihuahua?"

Burguesa Burger is closed on Sundays. "It's important to give people a day of rest to be with their families and God," Sinelli says. "I'm going to get tremendous pressure from franchisees to be open on that seventh day. But you can make as much money in six if you concentrate on them."

Antonio Swad, president of Pizza Patrón, feels his competitor buddy may have a slam-dunk.

"The only thing growing faster than the Hispanic demographic is the acceptance of Latin culture in America," Swad says. "You can't eat pizza every day. I wish people would. On their day off from pizza, a burger from Burguesa could be just the ticket."

Clay Dover, president of Raising Cane's Chicken Fingers, says Sinelli has a brilliant blend of practicality and creativeness. "Jeff's an innovator and thought leader pushing the bounds of traditional restaurant industry mindset."

Pushing the cusp

Sinelli has been pushing the cusp since 1995, when he opened a Deep Ellum nightclub and furnished it with equipment bought at a local auction. He built a string of nightclubs, which he sold in 1998 to concentrate Genghis Grill. He sold that in 2003 to work on Which Wich.

At the time, he talked about building a national sandwich chain even though his Main Street prototype – built before downtown's comeback – had a two-hour, weekdays-only lunchtime business. And this was in the midst of America's fascination with low-carb diets.

Most people thought he was slightly crazed. But he pulled it off.

Which Wich has 87 franchised units with 40-plus in the pipeline, he says, despite the deep freeze in franchise lending. Sinelli expects his company, which he owns outright, to finish the year with 115 franchise units and systemwide annualized revenue of about \$60 million. His take will be about \$8 million. Only the original store on Main Street is company-owned.

Sinelli expects to own fewer than 10 percent of Burguesa Burger's units.

He'll help franchisees pick out less-than-prime locations in strip shopping centers where it should cost less than \$50,000 to build a restaurant with 40 seats and large communal tables. By comparison, Which Wich costs about \$300,000 per unit to start up.

Tom Larranaga, publisher of *Nation's Restaurant News*, thinks Burguesa Burger may be a hit: "It caters to an obviously strong demographic. His market-selection strategy identifies high-potential locations. As far as concepts go, the burger segment is very hot and is straightforward from an operations standpoint."

So far, the prototype is on course to bring in \$500,000 in its first year, Sinelli says. Not bad for 388 square feet.

"But the first unit is not about money," he says. "It's about doing what I want to do and not be influenced by vendors. I'm an artist, and it's my art."