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## Field of better-burger chains keeps expanding

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When it comes to burgers, we seem to have a bottomless appetite.

After an influx of better burger joints cramped the market, even more are headed to the Tampa Bay area. Each promises the ultimate experience between two buns topped with good atmosphere and prices that hit the sweet spot between traditional restaurants and fast-food competitors.

BurgerFi, a 2-year-old company with several locations in South Florida, plans to open five or six local restaurants, including one proposed at 3702 W Kennedy Blvd., just east of Dale Mabry Highway. It has sold all of its franchise opportunities in Florida, except for parts of the Panhandle and St. Augustine, and has several leases under negotiation.

BurgerFi claims to pick up where other better-burger concepts leave off. Its Angus beef is grass fed from locally sourced farms, never injected with hormones or artificial ingredients, and delivered fresh to restaurants, not frozen. Its restaurants are environmentally friendly with furniture made from recycled materials and ceiling fans that use less electricity. Live music, craft beer and cupcakes add some hipness and fun.

Although I've never been to one, I'm envisioning an Evos meets Pizza Fusion.

The name stems from the company's goal to "burger-fy the nation" and is literally branded onto the buns, an interesting touch. Can it survive in an already crowded burger market? Absolutely, said Michael Brown, the company's real estate project manager.

"Burger is part of America's DNA," he said. "All we have to do is do it right and build the right team."

Some of BurgerFi's competitors, he notes, are past their prime or missing the mark.

Others are just firing up.

Last week, Tampa-based Square 1 Burgers and Bar announced the spring opening of its first location in Pinellas County, at 3942 Tyrone Blvd. in St. Petersburg. The restaurant is the sixth overall for the chain, which over the weekend celebrated the five-year anniversary of its first restaurant along Henderson Boulevard in Tampa. Others have followed in Brandon, Sarasota and Fort Myers. Like BurgerFi, it serves all-natural Angus burgers but gets kudos for its more exotic buffalo, duck and venison versions, too.

Also close to home, Burger 21, a better-burger concept founded by the owners of the Melting Pot Restaurant, has signed deals to open franchises in Sarasota and Albany, N.Y., the first in that state. The Tampa-based chain has five locations in the Tampa Bay and Orlando markets and 12 in development in seven states, and is scouting a potential location in South Tampa. It offers 21 kinds of burgers — hence the name — plus salads, chicken tenders and an ice cream bar with shakes, floats and sundaes.

These better-burger places compete with the likes of Five Guys, Beef 'O' Brady's and other neighborhood restaurants with a decent burger on the menu. Prices range from \$10 to \$15 for a meal — significantly more than fast-food chains, but you get more, too.

Research backs the boom. The latest U.S. Fast Food Market Outlook shows burger consumption is growing about 4 percent a year. Burgers aren't the healthiest option, but they're affordable, widely available and can be dressed up in tasty ways. Not surprisingly, among pizza, sandwiches, Mexican and other fast-food segments, burgers reign king.

**In related burger news,** Checkers is celebrating the reopening of a shuttered location in Largo, at 3150 East Bay Drive, starting at 9 a.m. Saturday. To draw crowds, the fast-food drive-in restaurant is offering free combo meals for a year — 52 in all — to the first 100 guests.

The location, which closed in 2010 after the franchisee fell on tough times, is part of Tampa-based Checkers' push to expand after years of sluggish sales. Checkers founder Herb Brown and current CEO Rick Silva will be on hand to cut the ribbon.

I can't imagine eating a year's worth of Big Bufords, but I'm sure plenty of people can. If you're one of them, get there early because I'm told fans have camped out the night before to be among the first in line.

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