

A Hamburger Today

A Tasty Hollywood Original at Hamburger Hamlet in Los Angeles

Posted by Damon Gambuto, May 5, 2010



[Photographs: Damon Gambuto]

Hamburger Hamlet

9201 W Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood, CA 90069 ([map](#)); 310-278-4924; hamburgerhamlet.com

Cooking Method: Griddled

Short Order: Still tasty after all these years. This Hollywood original has lost its authenticity, but the burgers haven't

Want Fries with That? Yes; the regular fries are flavorful and satisfying

Prices: The All American Classic Cheeseburger, \$10.95

Notes: If you are in LA, take a trip to the original on Sunset and head to a booth in the back for the authentic experience

The idea that Los Angeles is a one-industry town can make visiting it a bit of a let down. Certainly the movie

business defines the popular imagination of the city, but so much of the reality of Los Angeles lies in the basic, quotidian professions that make up all cities. You won't see movie stars on every corner, and you won't find much Hollywood history breathing without the life support of the tourist machinery. Though we've become much bigger than just a movie town, every now and then you'll find yourself in a place with the kind of history that reminds you that, once upon a time, it seemed like that's what it was.

[Hamburger Hamlet](#) on Sunset Boulevard was dreamed up not by some movie star with a spare million and a restaurant-sized ego, but by a couple who had grown tired of lives that were defined by their Hollywood jobs. These days, everyone just calls the historic Hollywood restaurant The Hamlet. I stopped in for The Hamburger.

It was 1950 when the movie costumer Marilyn Lewis convinced her soon-to-be husband Harry that they should invest \$3,500 on a restaurant space on the Sunset Strip. Her [notion](#) was that people wanted a good restaurant that didn't demand its clientele be turned-out in jackets and evening gowns. Harry was skeptical of his wife's ability to pull it off (she entitled her memoir [Are You Sure You Can Cook](#)), but he believed in the idea and the success that followed began to define the Los Angeles dining scene. Upscale casual became the defining restaurant aesthetic, and The Hamlet became a crossroads of Hollywood.

Marilyn and Harry eventually sold The Hamlet, so today's version is part of a six restaurant [mini-chain](#). Still, it hasn't lost all of its appeal to Hollywood. You'll see it as a location on [TV shows](#), find Elton John renting it out for his [birthday](#), and even Quentin Tarantino doesn't mind being [interviewed](#) there.



I didn't see any celebrities during my lunch, but that might have been because I barely looked up from my burger. Their All American Classic Cheeseburger comes with iceberg lettuce, tomato, Bermuda onion, American cheese, pickles, and Thousand Island. Of course, the addition of the last ingredient makes this a Southern California-style burger; then again, I imagine, we are as all-American as anyone else. The bun is a heavily sesame seeded affair that gets some nice toasting.



At first glance, The Hamlet burger seems rather ordinary. This, of course, isn't necessarily a mark against a burger, but in this landscape of high-end burgers I suspected that there would be a dated feeling to this one. I was, quite happily, both right and wrong. The flavors of The Hamlet burger are that recognizable Hollywood magic. Yes, you know what's coming, but it's hard to argue with the satisfaction it brings. The bun is soft and pliant. The veggies are fresh and plentiful, but not overpowering, and nicely matched with the sweetness of the Thousand Island. The extra fat of the American cheese helps smooth things out for that predictable, happy ending. All of this is familiar, even ordinary, but it's the patty that produces an unexpected twist.

Pressed slim (a personal preference), the rich chuck round (that hovers at an 80/20 meat to fat ratio) was ground to a surprising, and quite pleasing coarseness. The meat had the caramelization of a high heat, but the grind allowed it to break apart into succulent, properly-seasoned bits as I made my way through it. It was this hint of contemporary burger cookery that made my lunch better than I'd hoped for.

I had been to Hamburger Hamlet numerous times in the past and always found the burger to be passable, but certainly not a revelation. (Especially considering the expectations that come in naming a restaurant after the dish.) I can't say that Hamburger Hamlet makes one of the best burgers in a town full of burger stars, but after my most recent visit, it's fair to say that it can still shine.

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