

Cheeseburger classics

Here's a sample of the burgers you'll find at the Caseville festival later this month:



MEG-N-ATOR CHEESEBURGER

- Half-pound all-beef patty
- Applewood smoked bacon, chopped & pressed into patty with a dash of Worcestershire sauce, pepper and brown sugar
- Topped with Swiss cheese
- Served straight or deluxe on a sesame seed bun
- Chipotle ranch dressing or barbecue sauce for dipping
- Prepared and served at the Bay Café, 6750 Main St.



BOURBON ONION & BLEU CHEESEBURGER

- Half-pound all-beef patty
- Special bleu cheese sauce with marinated onion and bourbon glaze
- Served straight or garnished deluxe on a regular bun
- Prepared and served at the Port Elizabeth Grille, 6567 Main



SWEET STING CHEESEBURGER

- Half-pound certified Angus beef patty
- 2 slices of extra-thick cut applewood smokehouse bacon
- House sweet barbecue sauce (goes down smooth, but later stings like a bee)
- Topped with cheddar jack cheese
- Served straight or deluxe on a corn-dusted Kaiser bun
- Prepared and served at the Riverside Roadhouse, 6540 Main St.



ROYALE CHEESE SLIDER

- Premium ground beef rolled into portioned balls with special seasoning
- Flattened once on the grill
- Topped with finely grated onion slices and select cheese
- Served with pickle on an all-American bun
- Prepared and served at Baywatch on the Beach, 6398 Beach Lane

CHEESEBURGER PARADISE



Photos by MATT SHAW/Caseville Chamber of Commerce

A parade during a previous Cheeseburger Festival drew a crowd.

Thousands expected at Caseville's Jimmy Buffett-inspired family-friendly festival

By DAVE VIZARD
FREE PRESS SPECIAL WRITER

It's not as upscale as the cherry bash in Traverse City. Nor as formal as the tulip salute in Holland.

The Cheeseburger in Caseville festival is a rollicking celebration tailored to working families. Now in its 12th year, it offers lots of food, music and fun, while going easy on the wallet.

No doubt about it, cheeseburgers — slabs of ground beef dripping with Wisconsin's finest fare — are king each year when this tiny resort town in the Thumb comes alive for 10 days with a tropical party at nearby beaches, campgrounds and marinas.

And in Michigan, where almost every community has some kind of summer celebration, David Lorenz, manager of public and industry relations for Travel Michigan, said there's nothing quite like the cheeseburger fest.

"Caseville owns that niche," Lorenz said. "It's quirky; it's fun. It's a great party. The festival is set up for people who work hard for a living and want to take their families on an inexpensive getaway. You can do that when you're camping or staying on a boat at a marina."

The festival is becoming a tradition. Jerry and Melissa Compton of Sterling Heights have brought their three children to the festival for four years.

"We camp at Sleeper State Park, and it's a blast," said Jerry Compton, 49, a Chrysler worker who returned to his job this spring after more than a year of unemployment. "The kids look forward to it. They swim and take part in all the games. We've been coming here long enough that they've got cheeseburger friends now."

"All the camp sites are decked out with plastic palm trees and lights and flamingos — Jimmy Buffett music playing everywhere."

Buffett and his "Cheeseburger in Paradise" ode are the inspirations for the Caseville festival. The singer, author and entrepreneur has built a Margaritaville empire with Parrot-head followers and events and festivals all around the country.

But the Caseville bash, which runs Aug. 13-22 this year, is among the oldest and has evolved during the past dozen years.

"I think we're better rounded now," said Steve Louwers, president of the Chamber of Commerce and the cheeseburger festival ringmaster. "We have better live music and more events for the whole family. We try to change the festival every year to keep it fresh with new activities. We do not emphasize drinking — in fact we're one of the few festivals that does not sponsor a beer tent."

So, what makes tens of thousands of visitors come back year after year? Is it the aroma of frying beef? Is it the nightly live music? Or is it the sandpaper-like squish of hot sand between the toes from a Caseville beach?

"No, it's the people, man. The place is like Mardi Gras," said Brandon Lockwood, 23, of Roseville. "People from all over, walking and talking to each other. It's super awesome. Crazy hats and costumes. ... Good music, good party."

Lockwood, who works for a cable company, says he will be among 40 or so friends and relatives who will camp out this year.

Others festival revelers enjoy the marina atmosphere.

Bill and Kim Toland of Essexville keep their cabin cruiser in Caseville Harbor for the summer. The couple runs Bill's Body Shop and takes a break from banging out dings and dents to chomp some cheeseburgers and party with marina friends during the festival each year.

"Don't let this get around, but I like to grill up some ribs and pass them out," Bill Toland, 60, said. "Cheeseburgers are still the main event around here, but you've got to ... have a little variety."

And cheeseburger variety is a staple of the festival.

Every restaurant in town has its own specialty cheeseburger. Additionally, independent vendors set up grills in alleys, decks and porches — wherever they can squeeze them in. The result is a cornucopia of cheeseburgers to choose from on just about every street corner. They range in price from \$3 to \$7 apiece.

Rob Pillsworth, who owns and runs the Key North Surf Shop with his wife, Linda, is one of Caseville's top cheeseburger slingers.

Pillsworth helps keep track of the number of cheeseburgers sold and reports it to the local daily newspaper, which keeps a running count on its front page.

"The 225,000 estimate (from 2009) is a conservative number," he said. "It could be quite a few more than that. ... The economy in Michigan is such that people want to be able to take a vacation on one tank of gas and have a good time without it costing 'em an arm and a leg."

"That's what you get here. That's what we're set up to deliver."

DAVE VIZARD IS A FREELANCE WRITER WHO LIVES IN THE THUMB AND IS THE FORMER EDITOR OF TRUE NORTH MAGAZINE.

Cheeseburger in Caseville festival
Live music, food, and daily events
Aug. 13-22
In and around Caseville, 40 miles east of Bay City on I-25, Huron County
A \$7 festival button allows entry to all music and most events
Parade of Foods 6 p.m. Aug. 18
800-696-1247
www.casevillechamber.com

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