On an unusually hot and humid day in late August 1991, a FedEx truck pulled up in front of my house, and the driver handed me a thick envelope. This was an event in itself since FedEx parcels weren’t so common in those days—at least not for me. I hesitated before opening the envelope, trying to imagine what a package from the Gold Group in Santa Monica could possibly contain. When I finally opened it, I read:

Congratulations! The recipe you submitted to the Sutter Home Winery in the “Build A Better Burger” contest has been chosen as the best submitted from Region 1. The prize is an all-expenses paid trip for you and a guest to Napa Valley, California on September 27–29, 1991 to participate in the contest’s Grand Grill-Off!

Staring at the letter, I thought about my father, who bought lottery tickets every week. He would sit before the television eagerly awaiting the drawing, a nightly routine that was always followed by the crumpling of tickets and the optimistic muttering of the phrase, “You’ve got to have a dream.” By contrast, I’m the sort of person who occasionally buys lottery tickets, stuffs them in his wallet, and then forgets about them for days, or forever. Yes, I had forgotten that I had even entered the contest, and here I was, one of the twelve finalists who would receive an all-expenses paid trip for two to the Napa Valley to compete for a grand prize of ten thousand dollars. A winning lottery ticket had just jumped out of my wallet. I doubted very much that I would win the top prize, but it did mean a free trip and a chance to observe firsthand a culinary phenomenon.

Competition among professional cooks has been raging for centuries—the Assyrian king Sardanapalus is said to have introduced the first cooking competition with the prize of thousands of gold pieces in 600 B.C.—but amateur contests are relative latecomers. Now, thanks to product marketing, branding, and food PR, amateur competitions abound. From the National Dandelion Cookoff, held in Dover, Ohio, for a first prize of five hundred dollars, to the grandmother of them all, the Pillsbury Bake-Off, weighing in at one million dollars, hundreds of contests each year entice home cooks to don their thinking toques for prize-winning recipes. It was entirely on a whim that I became one of those hopeful contestants.

That I was even in the right continent to enter this contest was surprising. I had spent most of the previous three years in Argentina, where I painted while my wife represented her family’s art business. When the Argentine economy started spiraling in the wrong direction, we were told that we would be moving to France. Leaving Buenos Aires, the Paris of South America, for Paris, the Paris of Europe, hardly induced great despair. But at the last minute our Paris plans fell through, and August found us back in our hometown of Greenfield, Massachusetts, performing the commonplace task of buying food for dinner. I was standing before the Sutter Home wines when I saw a contest brochure with recipes for burgers. Ah, burgers. They looked so good that I had to try them. It was only a few days later that I thought to take the contest part seriously. After all, what were the chances of winning ten thousand dollars—about the same as winning the lottery? But I noticed that there was also a regional prize of one
hundred dollars, and I thought maybe I had a shot at that. So I decided to enter.

The next decision was, which recipe? Having lived in Argentina, where the beef was extraordinary, I was dismayed by the lack of quality meat in western Massachusetts. Although superior organic local beef and prime beef are available today, finding quality beef in 1991 was nearly impossible. Even burgers cooked rare tended to be dry. I liked to mix some lamb with beef for flavor, and I generally added a moistening agent to augment the juiciness of the burgers. I had read that James Beard placed an ice cube in his burgers to this end, and the 21 Club used butter—both of which add moisture to the center of the meat while the fire sears the outside. After experimenting with ice, butter, onions, peppers, and dozens of cheeses, the burger I decided to enter incorporated feta cheese and kalamata olives. I chose this combination not only for the obvious reasons of taste and my Mediterranean ancestry but also because these particular ingredients contain a great deal of moisture that would be released slowly while the burgers cooked. I finished the meat with a rub of dry spices to help char the outside. For such a burger, ketchup or mustard would have been as appropriate as Annie Hall’s pastrami with mayo on white bread, so I served them with cilantro-mint chutney. And, since the burgers cried out for fresh summer tomatoes, I rounded out the recipe with slices of tomato and red onion. No ordinary bun could possibly stand up to this mélange, so I opted for a special thick pita made by Father Sam’s Bakery in Buffalo, New York. I penned this recipe on a sheet of unlined paper and mailed it off the day of the deadline.

The thrill I experienced when I opened the Gold Group’s letter was soon overwhelmed by anxiety at the prospect of actually competing:

At this event, twelve finalists will compete for the Grand Prize of $10,000. You and the other eleven regional winners will prepare burgers at a barbeque festival held on the lovely grounds of the Sutter Home Winery. A panel of distinguished judges will determine the national winners.

The letter included an acceptance form that had to be notarized and returned within a week. Upon acceptance, I was sent another parcel, which included more forms along with a seventeen-page handbook of rules, specifics, and restrictions. Three pages alone were dedicated to a detailed schedule of how we would spend our three days in Napa. I learned that the recipe I had submitted could not be altered in any way and that each contestant had to make a minimum of twelve hamburgers to be sampled by seven “esteemed” judges and guests. Now, it is one thing to cook...
on your home grill, cocktail in hand, for your chums—but to make twelve identical burgers in unfamiliar surroundings for esteemed judges and discerning guests is something else again. Perfect timing was, for me, another fear factor. Each of us would draw a time slot, and our burgers had to be ready exactly on time or we would be disqualified. For the sake of consistency, the cooking conditions were to be the same for all contestants, including the use of charcoal briquettes. This was an issue for me because I only grill over hardwood charcoal. I would need to relearn how to cook.

For the next few weeks I practiced making large quantities of burgers over charcoal briquettes, which earned me quite a few friends and created a small cadre of food critics only too happy to share their reservations and suggestions for improvement.

Most of the ingredients for my recipe could be purchased at a well-stocked market in Napa (with Sutter Home graciously footing the bill), but we had been warned that we were responsible for supplying any “unusual” ingredients that the store might not carry. To win, I knew I would need the best feta and olives and my particular brand of pita. My parents were living in a mostly Greek neighborhood in Queens, New York, and I planned to drive down the day before we left for California to buy excellent feta and olives from one of the neighborhood shops. It also helped that they lived close to the airport, because the flight was scheduled at an hour normally reserved for vampires returning to the grave. Purchasing the special pitas from a local market to gather the rest of our groceries. At lunch the day we arrived at the festive Sutter Home grounds to begin our prep work for the contest, which had been because suddenly the exhaust pipe backfired and the engine conked out. “Don’t worry,” my father said. “It does this sometimes. The engine’s hot. Just give it a second.” And sure enough, as soon as I opened the door to check under the hood—a fruitless endeavor at best, since I know nothing about what goes on under a hood—the engine sprang to life, and I hopped back into the car. But even though the engine raced, we couldn’t top twenty-five miles an hour. Now bucking in addition to coughing and rattling, the Corolla crept along, inspiring a host of animated gestures and colorful language. We arrived at La Guardia with only minutes to spare. Valdina and I abandoned my father and his smoking car and dashed into the terminal.

Once we landed in San Francisco, Valdina and I headed straight to the welcome luncheon at an airport hotel. Many of the contestants were already digging into the elaborate spread of meats and cheeses. I instantly felt at home with these affable, hungry people, most of whom were already on a first-name basis. These were regular folks, I thought. Their dress was colorful California casual; they looked as though they’d just stepped off a tourist bus at the Louvre. Naturally, I assumed that all of them were as naïve as I was about cooking contests. I figured that they had happened into their local wine and spirits store, picked up a brochure, and said, “Say, maybe I can win a hundred bucks.” Only when one contestant greeted another with, “Hi! I haven’t seen you since the bake-off,” did I get an inkling that most of my fellow contestants were on a cooking contest circuit. In fact, I soon learned that a newsletter called the *Cooking Contest Chronicle* details all of the contests throughout the country. One contestant—fated to capture first prize with her dandy Hazelnut-Crusted Lamb Burgers—was on her second trip to the contest and mentioned that she had been given pointers from the previous grand prize winner. I, too, was cooking lamb, but suddenly, in this seasoned company, I felt a little sheepish.

The day of the cook-off, we arose to a glorious morning, hopped on the bus en masse, and proceeded to the supermarket to gather the rest of our groceries. At lunch the previous day, we had drawn the time slots when we were to have our burgers ready. These slots were fixed at strict five-minute intervals; I was scheduled to present my burgers at 2:10 P.M. By 1:00 A.M. we had arrived at the festive Sutter Home estate to begin our prep work for the contest, which would officially begin at 1:00 P.M. The large open lawn on one side of the Sutter Home estate was set in a broad
semicircle of red tableclothed workstations, each shaded
from the bright sun by individual white canopies. Dozens of
guest tables under red and white umbrellas checkered the
other side of the lawn. There was no shortage of balloons,
ribbons, and bows, but I am certain that the contestants
paid little mind to these embellishments as we approached
our workstations, fully equipped mini outdoor kitchens
complete with fire extinguishers. Almost all of the contest-
ants chose to fire up their kettle grills with a liquid fire
starter, but I immediately laid claim to one of the chimney
fire starters—by skipping the liquid fire starter you avoid a
chemical taste. I don’t know how many times I nervously
arranged and rearranged my ingredients and platters and
my own trusty Chinese cleaver on the six-foot folding table
before I was content with their order. As I finally began to
prep in earnest, the guests were just starting to march in—
to the beat of my pounding heart.

The flavor of my cilantro-mint chutney is best if it sits
in the fridge for a few hours to soften the edge of the
jalapeño peppers and ginger, so I made this condiment first.
Meanwhile, the other contestants feverishly chopped and
sliced and formed their burgers while friends and family
stood nearby chatting and taking photos, seemingly unaware
of the tension percolating around them. Because I was not
slated to serve my burgers for almost three hours, I did not
want to make them too soon and decided to start forming
my burgers only when the seven judges reached table three.
But watching everyone else busily dicing while I rearranged
my bags of pitas, tomatoes, and onions was disconcerting.
Luckily, a beer from the buffet lunch table eased this situation
considerably. I returned to my station at 1:30 p.m., just
as the judges were tasting the burgers at table one.

This delay gave me time to study those who would be
soon judging me. I knew some of their names, but I wasn’t
sure of what anyone looked like, and the ill-fitting red caps
shading their eyes further obscured their features. I noticed
that the courteous smiles the judges wore as they approached
each table quickly disappeared as they tucked into the
burgers. According to our handbook, the recipes were to
be judged “on the basis of taste (35%); originality of recipe
and ingredients (35%); and ease of preparation (15%).”
Having made copious notes after tasting burgers at tables
one and two, the four men and three women proceeded to
table three. It was time to get to work.

By the time I began, the grounds were teeming with
curious guests, asking us questions as we prepped. I answered
as affably as I could, but by this point I had switched on my
inner robot and was completely oblivious to the judges and
other contestants. My watch was my only concern. At 1:40
p.m., I put the lamb and beef into an aluminum bowl and
carefully apportioned the remaining ingredients on my
cutting board. I smashed garlic, minced olives, and crumbled
feta cheese, all to the tunes of the live zydeco band swing-
ing in the background. Still not entirely comfortable with
charcoal briquettes, I had started the fire a bit too early,
meaning that it would reach its peak too soon. One key to
a slightly crusty but moist burger is no secret: you need a
very hot fire. I shook in more briquettes, mixed them with
the hot ones, and fanned the flames with a foil pan. If I
was going to lose, it wouldn’t be for something as simple
as my fire being off.

By 1:55 p.m., the myriad scents of sizzling salmon,
turkey, tuna, beef, and lamb burgers filled the air. I was
surprised that the contestant slated to present her creation
immediately after me already had her salmon burgers on
the grill. Clearly they would be too cold or dry when the
judges arrived. The little mercenary in me whispered, “One
down, ten to go.” Watching the judges move around the
semicircle of cook stations as I sliced onions and tomatoes,
I suddenly had an awful realization, “They’re going to have
tucked into eight burgers and probably be stuffed by the
time they get to mine!” Pushing that thought aside, I
rearranged the uncooked burgers for at least the fifth time
and finally dusted them with a rub of cumin and coriander.
At exactly 2:00 p.m., I positioned my hand over the grill to
see how hot it was. Experiencing pain after only a few sec-
onds, I knew it was perfect. The judges were a little behind
schedule, and I forced myself not to put the burgers on too
soon. Then, at 2:05 p.m., I brushed oil on the grill, waited
a few seconds for the flare to die down, and arranged the
burgers. To the mixed glances of awe and horror from the
onlookers, a few licks of flame flared up against the bottoms
of the burgers. Rather than use the spray water bottle pro-
vided, I placed the lid on for a few seconds, then removed
it. At four minutes, I flipped the burgers. Two minutes later
I flipped the burgers onto a platter, burning myself only
three or four times in the process. As passersby joked and
sipped cool drinks, I managed to smile amidst the intense
heat. Bloated by burgers, the judges seemed increasingly
slow. I slipped a foil pan over the burgers and tossed the
pitas on the grill, then quickly removed them and slid
the burgers inside.

At 2:15 p.m., just as I poured a spoonful of cilantro-mint
chutney into the last burger-stuffed pita, the judges arrived,
wearing their black Sutter Home aprons and carrying
their intimidating clipboards. I cut the burgers in half with
my cleaver, noting that thinner pitas would have indeed
fallen apart beneath the juicy burgers, onions, tomato, and
chutney. The judges looked, jotted notes, and stepped forward to taste. We were not permitted to “instigate discussion” with the judges, and I seem to recall standing there like a garden statue. There were nibbles, then gobbles, then gulps—followed by more jotting. That the burgers were juicy was immediately noted by one of the younger judges. To my horror, she said to one of the elder judges about to dig into his burger, “Be careful. It’s a bit runny.” After several large bites, he murmured softly, “Then I’m running right after it.”

Apart from that, they said little except to thank me politely. Putting aside the remnants of their burgers, the judges scribbled some notes and passively moved on to the final three contestants. It was over, and I naturally wondered what I could have done to make my burgers better. It was now the guests’ turn to sample. If the judges were mostly closedmouthed, save for gobbling their burgers, the guests were effusive in their comments. I assumed that they were uniformly enthusiastic to all the contestants, but Valdina, dutiful wife and sneak, had been tracking the judges. “They ate more of yours than anyone else’s.”

“Maybe they were just hungry,” I said.

“After all those other burgers? I don’t think so.”

My grilling done, I felt desperate to remove my toque, but first a TV crew wanted to interview me. Word had gotten out that I was a novice on the cook-off circuit, making me the novelty act. Afterwards, I cleaned up my workstation and joined the other contestants in group commiseration. The judges had finished the last of their burgers and convened to a table to share their notes while we all spilled our thoughts about what went wrong with our burgers. At least I had no horror story to recount, like one contestant whose chicken burgers had fallen apart. (“Two down,” I thought, “nine to go.”) We chatted with one eye on the judges’ table. Some of the contestants were already resigned to defeat and planning for their next big cook-off. As the judges finished their tabulations, a crowd was gathering in front of the podium. It was just after 5:00 P.M. when Louis “Bob” Trinchero, chairman of the board of Sutter Home Winery, as well as of the judges, made his way to the podium to the applause of the crowd.

Bob spoke about the contest and the merits of all the contestants. I calculated that I had a good shot at third place, but I was not betting on anything. I had read all the recipes beforehand and found each prize worthy, particularly the Yellow-Fin Tuna Burger created by a professional chef. I held my breath as Bob Trinchero announced the judges’ award for Three-Nut Turkey Burgers with Tropical Fruit Salsa. My hands were suddenly like ice. Third Place went to Spicy Calypso Burgers. My chances were getting both better and worse when second place was given to Italian Burgers with Confetti Salsa. We all clapped enthusiastically.

Hazelnut-Crusted Lamb Burgers garnered First Place and the ribbon. The applause must have grown louder, but I could only hear the beat of my heart. For grand prize I still had the formidable Yellow-Fin Tuna Burger to contend with, but I consoled myself that this was a weekend that would have its own room in my museum of memory. I had made it here, after all. That was enough.

In the lingering aroma of the grilled burgers and dying embers, the grand prize was announced. Trinchero fumbled over the pronunciation of the winner’s name, and nobody moved. He read it again. Well, let’s face it. This wasn’t the first time someone had mangled my name. The other contestants beamed at me, clapping loudly along with the entire crowd. Trinchero pinned a ribbon on my Sutter Home apron, then handed me an oversized foam board check, just like the ones I had so often seen on quiz shows in my youth. When I was asked to say the proverbial few words, only lyrics to a Frank Loesser song immediately sprang to mind. I said, “I’m the most happy fella, in the whole Napa Valley.” I don’t know if anyone knew what I was referring to, but at that moment I didn’t really care.

The next half hour was taken up by a photo session of the winning contestants, but I don’t remember a second of it. We all returned to the Vintage Inn—and I to Earth—at around 5:00 P.M. Perhaps it was the second martini, but as I sat with Valdina on the sun-dappled porch of our suite, I could not imagine a more perfect day—and all thanks to a hamburger.

The next morning the contestants said good-bye as though we had been friends forever. Most of them were making plans to meet again at future ventures—chicken, avocado, and garlic contests loomed on the horizon. When one of them asked me if I would continue entering contests, I was reminded of something Voltaire had said about partaking in a somewhat scandalous escapade: “Once, a philosopher; twice, a pervert.” But instead of quoting him, I replied, “I don’t think so. I can’t even remember where I put my lottery tickets.”
Lamburgers à la Grecque with Cilantro-Mint Chutney

SERVES 6

Cilantro-Mint Chutney

\(\frac{1}{3}\) cup plain yogurt
2 tablespoons chopped yellow onion
1 ½ fresh jalapeño peppers, stemmed, seeded, and chopped
1 ½ tablespoons chopped fresh ginger root
\(\frac{1}{3}\) cup fresh cilantro (coriander) leaves
\(\frac{1}{3}\) cup fresh mint leaves
1 large garlic clove, chopped
\(\frac{1}{2}\) teaspoon salt, preferably kosher
Pinch sugar

To make the chutney, combine all the ingredients in a blender or food processor and blend thoroughly. Cover and chill for at least several hours or as long as 24 hours. In a grill with a cover, prepare a medium-hot fire, preferably with natural hardwood charcoal, for direct-heat cooking.

Lamburgers

1 pound lean ground sirloin
1 pound lean ground lamb
1 garlic clove, minced
\(\frac{3}{4}\) cup crumbled feta cheese (about 2 ounces)
\(\frac{1}{2}\) cup minced, pitted Kalamata olives
1 teaspoon salt, preferably kosher
6 medium-sized pita breads, preferably thicker variety
\(\frac{1}{4}\) cup fruity olive oil, preferably extra-virgin
1 teaspoon ground cumin mixed with 1 teaspoon ground coriander
Vegetable oil for brushing on grill rack
Condiments
Tomato slices
Thin red onion slices
Red leaf lettuce

To make the burgers, combine the sirloin, lamb, garlic, cheese, olives, and salt in a large bowl. Handling the meat as little as possible to avoid compacting it, mix well. Divide the mixture into 6 equal portions and form the portions into round patties to fit the pita breads. Brush the patties with the olive oil and then sprinkle with the cumin mixture.

When the fire is ready, brush the grill rack with vegetable oil. Place the patties on the grill, cover, and cook until browned on the bottom, about 4 minutes. With a wide spatula, turn the patties and cook until done to preference. During the last few minutes of cooking, place the pita breads on the outer edge of the grill and turn to toast lightly on both sides.

Place the patties inside the pita bread pockets and add the chutney. Offer the condiments at the table.

Reprinted with permission from Build a Better Burger: Celebrating Sutter Home’s Annual Search for America’s Best Burgers by James McNair (Ten Speed Press, 2005).