

# Sound the alarm ... for Torrance's Buffalo Fire Department

By Merrill Shindler Restaurant Critic  
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Well, leave it to Michael Shafer to open the right restaurant in the right place at the right time.

For those not familiar with his bearded, ponytailed visage, Shafer is the chef, owner and guiding light of the much-loved downtown Torrance eatery called Depot.

It's a hotbed of quirkily creative culinary inspirations, wild and wacky cocktails, good wines and the sheer ebullience of Shafer himself, who seems to know everyone who comes into the restaurant on a first-name basis. Indeed, he usually knows their kids' names. And their golf handicaps, as well.

Depot is situated across the street from the North American headquarters of both Toyota and Honda, which means he has a dining pool of some 12,000 workers to call upon. But, in these hard times, not all of them are up to one of Shafer's "Primal Cuts" or his sublime "Big Cat Mix" of lamb, beef, rock shrimp sausage and fries.

And so when Aioli, a Mediterranean tapas bar across the street, closed late last year, Shafer leaped upon the opportunity.

In less than six weeks, he converted the room from a taste of Barcelona into a slice of Buffalo. He built a better mousetrap. And the world has been beating a path to his door.

His new Buffalo Fire Department is decorated in what you might call Firehouse Moderne, with framed bits of memorabilia from local fire stations; there's even a fire hydrant near the door that leads into the bar.

There's also a fire motif, with a variety of framed record album covers (remember LPs?) that used images of fire.

But mostly there's just down-home comfort - including a long wooden table that's great for oversized groups or local singles dropping by for some beer and a bowl of chili.

By opening what's basically a burger joint (albeit one that offers a foie gras burger among its many options), Shafer is following in the footsteps of a multitude of high-end chefs who decided it would be fun to go down-market - and who found much success by changing their focus.

Hubert Keller of Fleur de Lys did it in Las Vegas with his Burger Bar in Mandalay Bay. Laurent Tourondel (BLT Steak) also did it in Las Vegas with his BLT Burger at the Mirage. Leonard

Schwartz (Maple Drive) is doing it in Hollywood with Zeke's Smokehouse. And Neal Fraser (Grace) did it on Beverly Boulevard with BLD.

Shafer opened Depot in 1991. And, after 18 years, he was clearly hankering for something new to occupy his considerable culinary skills. The man is famously restless, always tinkering with his menu, with his cocktails, with his ice creams.

What the Buffalo Fire Department gives him is a whole new box of toys with which to play.

And so he hasn't just come up with an impressive array of Buffalo chicken wings (the man, after all, is a native of Buffalo, N.Y., where Buffalo wings were born at the fabled Anchor Bar) - served at four levels of heat, from mild to suicide - he has also deconstructed his chicken wings and turned them into fried chicken chunks served with a blue cheese dip.

A wing served as a wing tends to slow down the eating process - there's a lot of chewing, hunting and picking involved in getting the good bits down. But served as boneless chunks, well, it's an exercise in joyous gluttony.

Shafer is also a man with a proper respect for the semiotics of the french fry. His basic fries come crispy and salty, ready for a bath in a bowl of ketchup. They also come covered with the Fire Department's excellent chili - a bowl of red that transcends mere chili-ness on its path to chili nirvana.

And, if you want to go for the gusto, there's a dish called Sloppy Fries, in which the fries are topped with chili and cheese, onions and guacamole, salsa and "secret sauce."

But really, the chicken chunks, and the wings, and the fries - and, for that matter, the crispy fried shaved onions and the grilled jalapenos - are just a warm-up for the main event, the burgers.

Indeed, the menu reminds us that the initials of the Buffalo Fire Department also stand for "Burgers, Fries and Drinks" - which pretty well sums up the place.

There are two dozen burgers on the menu, each built around a half-pound of Angus ground chuck, which is a very good cut of meat to use, for it's neither too lean nor too fat; it sits just right in the middle of the burger meat spectrum.

For those who crave a certain degree of Zen simplicity, there is a burger called The Burger, which is just beef, lettuce, tomato, onions and secret sauce on a puffy bun baked fresh in-house. (How like Shafer to do his own baking!)

It's a fine burger. But it's also just the beginning. From there, the burgers expand madly, to great extremes.

There's a version flavored with Thai BBQ and wasabi sauce. Another re-creates huevos rancheros as a burger topped with a fried egg, salsa, guacamole and cheese. There's "Slim's Famous Speed Burger" made with four cheeses and a triple rasher of bacon.

There are burgers named for (I assume) Shafer's sons and his wife. ("Nancy's Burger: Any Burger, As Long As She Doesn't Have to Clean It Up.") And there's the Chef's Burger, made with foie gras, caramelized onions and a fried egg.

The burgers are a lovely thing, puffy and proud, sitting tall on the plate with a pile of french fries on the side, looking as if the whole construct will collapse unless you start eating fast. Which is hard not to do.

I did my eating seated in the bar, because I like eating in bars and because that's where the TVs are and I like watching the game of the moment while chewing on my wings, my fries, and my burger, all washed down with some good artisanal beers.

And I should mention, as a matter of due diligence, that there's more on the menu than burgers and fries.

There's an impressive array of salads, including a Thai Cobb, and a Buffalo chicken and blue cheese chopped salad, which sounds like one of the best things that can humanly be shoveled into the gullet.

There's a section of the menu titled "Other Stuff," where you'll find a garlic-

shrimp burger; a portobello mushroom, lettuce, tomato and gorgonzola sandwich (the man really is antic); a grilled Polish sausage sandwich topped with roasted peppers and onions; what may be the best corn dog in the South Bay; and a hot dog using a wurst from Torrance's Alpine Village.

For dessert, there are s'mores. Of course there are. From Chef Shafer, I'd expect nothing less.

#### **BUFFALO FIRE DEPARTMENT**

Address: 1261 Cabrillo Ave., Torrance.

Phone: (310) 787-7501.

Cuisine: American.

Hours: Lunch and dinner, every day.

Details: Full bar. Valet parking. Reservations essential for groups.

Prices: Appetizers, \$1-\$10. Entrees: \$7-\$18.

Cards: MC, V.

Merrill Shindler is a freelance restaurant critic.