


IN-N-OUT BURGER



A BEHIND-THE-COUNTER
LOOK AT THE FAST-FOOD CHAIN
THAT BREAKS ALL THE RULES

Stacy Perman



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“The destiny of nations depends on the manner in which they nourish themselves.”

—Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin,
The Physiology of Taste (1854)

“Keep it real simple. Do one thing and do it the best you can.”

—Harry Snyder, co-founder
of In-N-Out Burger



PROLOGUE

On the dry, desert morning of April 24, 2007, the sky swept clean of clouds, In-N-Out Burger opened its 207th restaurant in Tucson. Located at the edge of the El Con Mall on East Broadway, not far from the campus of the University of Arizona, the opening was the fabled California chain's fourteenth entry in the state. Almost immediately a boisterous crowd appeared, requiring the presence of police officers to direct traffic and help with crowd control. While a swirl of excitement usually accompanied new store openings, the Tucson kickoff seemed to generate an unprecedented level of hysteria. For the first time in years, the area around the depressed and largely vacant El Con was bustling. The pent-up demand for In-N-Out marked a drastic change for the city's oldest shopping center, which had been languishing for so long that a local newspaper had once described its "deserted core" as filled with little more than an "eerie stillness."

As customers descended upon In-N-Out's freshly paved drive-through, the scene quickly took on the air of a noisy parade. There were businessmen in suits, women in heels, truckers in jeans, college students in T-shirts and with pierced noses, construction workers in heavy boots, and moms with babies on their hips. They all braved the chain's infamously long lines, enduring waits of more than two and three hours. In the sky overhead, news helicopters whirled, capturing the clamor in the parking lot below. After witnessing the ensuing frenzy

from the ground, a local science fiction author named Matt Dinniman was later moved to remark: “If you actually drove by the place today, you’d think Jesus himself was working the shake machine.”

Remarkably, the official kickoff was marked with little fanfare. Two workers carried a simple white sign down East Broadway with the familiar In-N-Out logo—a yellow boomerang arrow—and written in block lettering the words “WE ARE OPEN,” and propped it up on a pair of wooden sawhorse legs. The associates fired up the grill, unlocked the doors, and opened for business. There weren’t any strings of colored plastic flags fluttering in the wind to herald the arrival of Tucson’s very first In-N-Out; there weren’t any prizes offered, furry mascots, or any of the other marketing gimmicks that usually lure customers to new fast-food openings. There was no promotional advertising either—just a small sign that stood on the lot for some time. “Coming Soon, In-N-Out Burger.”

In fact, there was no “grand opening,” at least not in the traditional sense; the carnival atmosphere was created entirely by In-N-Out’s rabid fans. The chain didn’t need to advertise its opening; for weeks, its devotees had been broadcasting the news to one another.

For two years, ever since word had spread that an In-N-Out was coming to their city, residents had been waiting anxiously. As April 24 approached, a frantic excitement overtook Tucson and the surrounding suburbs. Despite months of speculation and press inquiries, the company, while friendly, revealed little—so a number of Tucsonans began their own campaign to uncover any and all signs of progress. Driving by the site regularly, they documented sightings of a coat of fresh paint or the pouring of concrete and broadly circulated their findings. When the day finally came that the Tucson In-N-Out was no longer just a matter of hope and rumor, it felt like Christmas in April. “There are so many people excited about these stores coming to town,” was how Dave Smith, a local real estate broker, described the thrill that blanketed the city. “It is like they are almost willing them out of the ground.”

For years, Arizona residents regularly drove across state lines in order to eat one of In-N-Out’s vaunted Double-Double burgers.

When In-N-Out opened its first Arizona store in the city of Scottsdale in 2000, Tucsonans got in their cars and made the ninety-mile journey. While Scottsdale might not be considered convenient, it was certainly closer to Tucson than the Lake Havasu City location that opened the same year (which at a distance of 321 miles from Tucson was an unreasonable distance for a burger run—although not an entirely uncommon one). In fact, until In-N-Out first arrived in Arizona, many residents flew roundtrip between Phoenix and the Ontario International airport in California expressly for a \$2.75 hamburger.

The Tucson debut was handled not unlike a presidential visit or a movie premiere. Prior to the official opening, local dignitaries and members of the city council joined In-N-Out executives at an invitation-only, pre-opening party that also served as a final run-through for the associates. Tucson's media covered the official opening; the *Arizona Daily Star* sent a team of six journalists on an assignment that they dubbed "Operation In-N-Out."

Ravenous customers began arriving in the dark of night, long before the store's 10:30 a.m. opening. Actually, people began lining up at 2:00 a.m. the day before, some sleeping in their cars overnight. By 6:00 a.m. on the morning of the opening, about a dozen folks were pressed against the front doors. By noon, the crowd had grown appreciably, hundreds of people having descended upon the fast-food restaurant and its signature crossed palm trees. Marveling at the thick, snaking procession of people, Phil Villarreal, a reporter for the *Arizona Daily Star*, recalled soviet-era bread lines in Moscow.

As the day wore on, the walk-in line continued to expand like an unencumbered waistband. By midday it had grown so dense, at times one hundred customers strong and six and seven people deep, that the entire line had taken over a neighboring parking lot and yellow plastic police tape was used to rope off the crowd in as orderly a fashion as possible. As the mercury rose, bright-eyed and smiling In-N-Out associates passed out cups of water and pink lemonade to help relieve both the tedium and the heat for the customers waiting in line. After inspecting what could only be described as a stampede, In-N-Out's vice president of planning and development Carl Van

Fleet assessed the scene with the chain's typical understatement, telling the *Daily Star*, "This is not something that happened overnight. I think it just sort of grew with us." As night fell, the crowd showed little sign of thinning out. At nearly 10:00 p.m., there were still over one hundred cars in the drive-through lane.

The company temporarily opened a mobile kitchen on-site to help with the constant demand. In-N-Out had already sent in a team of about forty veteran employees (called the "In-N-Out All-Stars") from existing locations to help the two dozen new associates work the opening. Like a mobile commando unit, the All-Stars are highly skilled and experienced In-N-Out veterans, trained to be able to handle any situation under pressure. Dispatched to every new store opening since about 1988, their job was and is to guarantee a smooth debut. But even with its own precision planning, military execution, and its All-Stars on hand, In-N-Out Burger could have had no idea of the kind of frenzy that the Tucson opening would create.

Drivers sat in their cars for hours, waiting to place their orders. The drive-through line stacked up for blocks, ran out onto the street, and overflowed into the El Con Mall's parking lot, snarling up traffic. A nimble associate wearing a menu affixed to a chain went from car to car taking orders and sending them back to the kitchen via PDA in an attempt to help speed things up.

Others abandoned the pile-up of cars altogether and made the pilgrimage by foot. A swell of people had already formed inside the restaurant; the overflow spilled outside, long past the glass entry doors into controlled chaos. A respectful rush of customers inched their way toward the gleaming stainless steel counter where a group of smiling workers in their crisp white uniforms, red aprons affixed with large silver kilt pins, and paper cadet hats awaited them. Remarkably, despite the constant crush of customers, the associates maintained their smiles throughout the grueling day.

Under a yellow neon sign that spelled out in cursive letters the company's motto—"Quality You Can Taste"—those at the front of the line ordered from In-N-Out's famously limited menu of three burger items, french fries, soft drinks, lemonade, and milkshakes—a

menu that has barely changed since Harry Truman was president. There were no Mediterranean wraps, Caesar chicken salads, or children's menus. Facing the antiseptically clean open kitchen, customers saw that there were no heat lamps, freezers, or microwaves, and the heavy odor of grease and meat was curiously absent. There were no bags of flash-frozen fries on-site either. Rather, in a procedure that has gone unchanged since the chain first opened in 1948, a cheery associate hand-peeled, cut, and fried the raw Kennebec potatoes grown especially for the chain. At In-N-Out, the lettuce is still leafed by hand, the sponge-dough buns are baked daily—and both the cheese and the ice cream for its shakes remain 100 percent dairy.

After braving the lines, some ordered forty or fifty burgers to bring back to friends and co-workers. One customer, Judi Esposito, arrived in hand with a stockpile of gift coupons worth forty dollars that she had collected for the past year and half in anticipation of the opening. "It sounds crazy," she told a local reporter, simply thrilled to finally order a meal from In-N-Out on her home turf, "but they're just really good, sloppy hamburgers."

Those in the know ordered off-menu from what has become known as In-N-Out's "secret menu." An insider code, it is an unofficial parallel menu that has traveled from Southern California to Northern California and then on to Nevada and Arizona and even beyond In-N-Out's traditional borders. Although nobody knows its exact origins, the secret menu has existed for decades, and knowledge of Animal Style, the 4x4, and the Flying Dutchman has been passed on primarily through word of mouth (although in recent years the secret menu can also be found on In-N-Out's website).

The Tucson opening was In-N-Out's busiest to date. In the days and weeks following the launch, the massive lines and pileups subsided only slightly. A month after the opening, fans reported that the drive-through lane dropped from one hundred cars to fifty, with the waiting time inside averaging about thirty minutes from order to pick up.

After the enthusiastic reception given to the Tucson store, when on the morning of November 15, 2007, In-N-Out Burger unveiled its

second Tucson-area store in the suburb of Marana near Interstate 10, the local NBC affiliate was moved to report, “Big news for Marana today. The town gets its first In-N-Out Burger. . . . So not only are we getting bigger around the waistline, so is the area.”

Although the scene was decidedly tamer than the one that consumed the Tucson opening seven months earlier, it was no less anticipated or exciting. Bracing themselves against the hungry crowds, the Marana police set up a command center near the shop on 8180 North Cortaro Road and five off-duty police officers (hired by In-N-Out) were assigned to direct traffic. Half a dozen people staked out places near the front doors in the early morning hours, hoping to be among the first in line.

Available only in California, parts of Nevada, Arizona, and more recently Utah, the opening of a new In-N-Out Burger has long been cause for outsized celebration. When an In-N-Out opened in suburban San Francisco in 2001, there were epic lines for months. In 2003, the anticipated Millbrae opening was delayed because city officials were concerned about the kind of traffic jams that In-N-Out would bring. When in 2007 *Departures* magazine printed the unconfirmed rumor that In-N-Out Burger was scouting locations in New York City, excited East Coast fans chased down the report, frantically dialing the company’s toll-free telephone number.

Golfers and groupies on the PGA Tour cheered when the Scottsdale store opened. Not far from the TPC Scottsdale Golf Course (where the \$6 million purse FBR Open is played), the pros began having In-N-Out burgers delivered directly to them following their rounds. When Jonathan Kaye won the tournament in 2004, his pro-am partner was in such a hurry to hit the In-N-Out that he forgot to turn in Kaye’s scorecard and ended up calling it in from the drive-through lane. “It was crazy,” Greg Wolf, the course’s head professional, later exclaimed. “There were cops directing traffic there for the first month.”

And when, on the eve of the Fiesta Bowl in 2007, a reporter asked Ohio State quarterback Troy Smith if the Buckeyes had any advantage over playing Florida State at Sun Devil Stadium (since it was the team’s fourth trip to Phoenix in five years), the Heisman Tro-

phy winner replied, “The first thing I am most familiar with is In-N-Out Burger, which is around the corner from our hotel. Probably the height of my day every day is getting a chance to go to In-N-Out Burger. I love those cheeseburgers.”

The little regional chain that was built on the philosophy of quality, made-to-order hamburgers, and “the customer is always king” had over the years drawn fans from every imaginable quarter. In an industry that has come to be seen as a scourge on modern society, responsible for everything from obesity to urban blight to cultural imperialism, this modest, low-slung eatery with the big yellow arrow is unique among fast-food breeds: a chain revered by hamburger aficionados and epicureans, anti-globalization fanatics and corporate raiders, meat-eaters and even vegetarians. Make mention of the three monosyllabic words and a kind of reverie takes hold. People’s eyes close and their lips begin to quiver with the pleasures of sense memory. “For years, In-N-Out was the other woman in my life,” my mother once told me. “I’d be cooking dinner and your father would go to an In-N-Out on his way home from the office. He’d eat a Double-Double, fries, and a chocolate shake. I’d have dinner on the table, and he’d say ‘I’m not hungry.’”

The family-owned, fiercely independent chain has remained virtually unchanged since its inception in 1948. It is the envy of the industry and the darling of investment bankers, who routinely put In-N-Out on their IPO wish list. In fact, by the end of Eric Schlosser’s screed against the industry, *Fast Food Nation*, as nearly every other chain is pilloried and left in a heap, In-N-Out Burger remains standing virtually unscathed. It has long been adored by its legions of fans, whose main complaint seems to be that there just aren’t enough of the restaurants around.

With little prodding, In-N-Out has earned the ringing endorsement of an astonishing spectrum of people. Rocker Courtney Love reportedly insisted on visiting an In-N-Out just before entering rehab in 2004. A year earlier, Julia Child—the grand dame of French cuisine—dispatched her assistant to the chain in order to sate her craving while she was in the hospital recovering from knee surgery.

During the 2004 NBA finals (the Los Angeles Lakers against the Detroit Pistons), California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger had a wager with Michigan governor Jennifer Granholm in In-N-Out burgers over the outcome of the game.

Singer Beyoncé Knowles admitted to making an In-N-Out run before the 2007 Academy Awards show. Following the ceremony, Oscar winner Helen Mirren was photographed tucking into an In-N-Out burger in her custom Christian Lacroix gown at *Vanity Fair*'s post-Oscar party. Since 2001, the magazine's editor, Graydon Carter, has rented one of In-N-Out's cookout trailers for the annual fete. "The stand has always been a huge hit," he explained. "Many of the people who come from the ceremony are ravenous and make straight for the stand. Plus, many of the women have been fasting for weeks to get into the dresses they are wearing."

Over the years, the relationship between Hollywood and In-N-Out Burger has only intensified, becoming nearly as much a part of celebrity culture as fan magazines, autographs, or publicity stills. When discussing his favorite places to dine in Los Angeles (for an interview promoting his film *Collateral*), Tom Cruise listed In-N-Out Burger alongside the longtime hot spot for the well-heeled, Spago. While filming *The Green Mile*, Tom Hanks rented an In-N-Out cookout trailer for the set. And sly In-N-Out Burger references have found their way into a number of television programs and films from the Coen brothers' cult hit *The Big Lebowski* to *The Simpsons*—all of which prompted the august *New York Times* to ask, "What's so hip about a hamburger chain?" on its cultural pages.

Displaced Californians pine for In-N-Out's Double-Double burgers; most of them can sing the chain's radio jingle. "In-N-Out, that's what a hamburger's all about," with greater confidence and accuracy than they can the national anthem. Travelers are known to time their itineraries to hit an In-N-Out during a mealtime, and its most ardent fans enjoy comparing notes on how far they have gone to find an In-N-Out. When British-born Kelly Grant worked as a nanny, she used to take her five- and seven-year-old charges to the In-N-Out Burger by Los Angeles International Airport. Then she would take

them across the field where the trio would eat their burgers and plane spot. “It was our favorite thing to do,” she explained.

In 1999, In-N-Out made international headlines after U.S. army sergeant and Baldwin Park native Andrew Ramirez told a phalanx of reporters that what he craved most after being held as a prisoner of war in Kosovo by Serbian forces for thirty-two days was a Double-Double. Ramirez’s mother, Vivian, made headlines of her own when she flew to see him at his German army base following his release, carrying with her two of the burgers and an order of fries.

In-N-Out’s fan-customers can usually remember the first time they ate at an In-N-Out much in the same way that most people can remember their first kiss. “I grew up in Detroit,” explained Robert LePlae, the president of advertising agency TBWA/Chiat/Day. “I remember it was on my first trip to California in 1984 on a production shoot. A buddy of mine from college took me to the In-N-Out in Fullerton. A year later I moved to California, and it was the first meal I had off the plane. I thought about In-N-Out Burger all year.”

In fact, when famed restaurant The French Laundry reached its twelfth anniversary in 2006, its Michelin-starred chef Thomas Keller, a longtime fan, celebrated with his staff by having three hundred In-N-Out burgers and a small mountain of fries delivered to the restaurant. That same year, in something of a tribute, Keller, was photographed in the April issue of *Food & Wine* magazine sitting at a booth at the Napa Valley In-N-Out wearing one of the chain’s paper cadet hats, the restaurant’s manager sitting across from him.

Frequently the subject of rumor and speculation, the fastidiously private company has always shunned the kind of publicity that its competitors routinely courted. And while it has rarely bothered to counter or clarify the murmurings, the conjecture has touched on everything from the recipe for its secret sauce to the meaning of the twin palm trees planted in a cross formation at each store—there has even been speculation as to whether the company was run by some kind of Christian cult. Every so often, word that In-N-Out Burger is

about to franchise or be sold makes the rounds. While this kind of business gossip has been kicking around for decades, all its customers usually want to know is how soon an In-N-Out Burger will open near them.

During the sweltering summer of 2006, the rumor mill went into overdrive. In early August, In-N-Out Burger issued a statement announcing that Esther Snyder, who (along with her husband, Harry Snyder) had founded the chain, had died. She was eighty-six years old. Esther's death left her twenty-four-year-old granddaughter Lynsi Martinez the sole heir to the In-N-Out Burger fortune.

A petite, unassuming woman, Esther Snyder had spent most of her life determinedly maintaining In-N-Out as a private, family-owned business, keeping it virtually unchanged as decades rolled by. She did so despite countless offers from investment bankers, venture capitalists, private individuals, and large corporations, all of whom were hell-bent on buying into the hugely profitable chain's unparalleled popularity. Esther Snyder preserved her family's privacy even as In-N-Out transformed from a single burger stand to a cult phenomenon.

Her death sparked a round of speculation about the future of the counterintuitive chain that had stridently bucked every industry trend. It was exactly the kind of speculation that had only recently begun to die down. Throughout part of 2005 and much of 2006, an ugly lawsuit played out in Los Angeles Superior Court in which it was alleged that Martinez and her brother-in-law Mark Taylor were plotting a coup to oust Esther from the company. For months, a series of bitterly incriminating charges and counter-charges that included fraud, embezzlement, and boardroom power grabs were hurled back and forth between Martinez and a longtime company executive named Richard Boyd. For the first time in its entire history, the company was subjected to a merciless spotlight, a blast of unwelcome publicity that unveiled a slew of internal tensions and threatened to pull back the curtain on the inner workings of the famously tight-lipped company. As the events unfolded, numerous questions emerged; chief among them: would In-N-Out Burger stay the same?