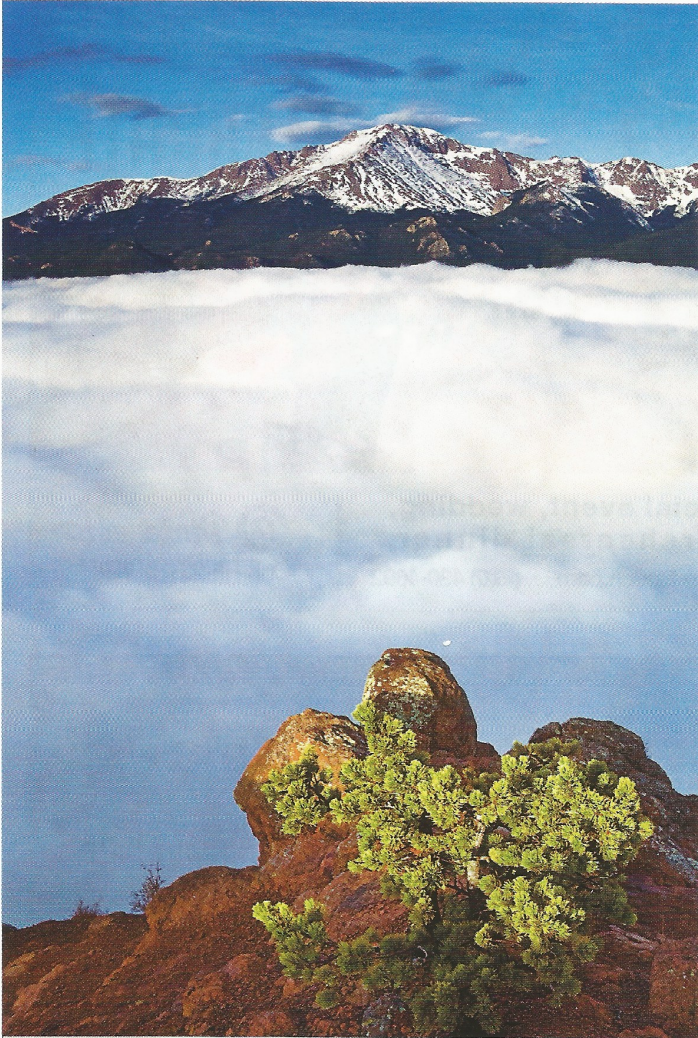


# ColoradoLife

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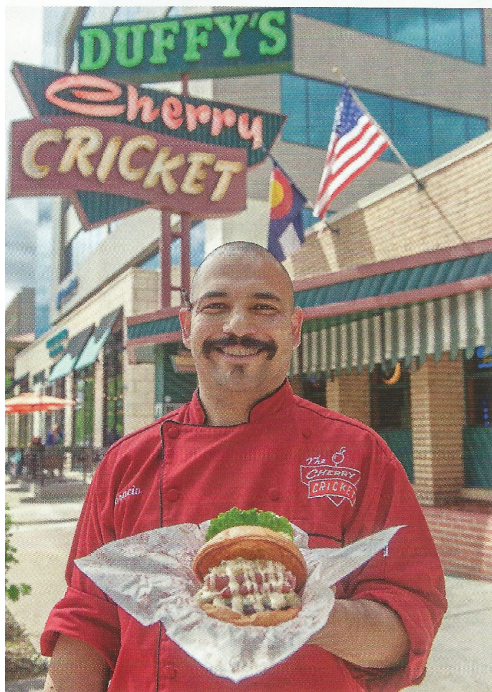


# THE CHERRY CRICKET

## CHERRY CREEK'S 'BLACK SHEEP' FOR THREE-QUARTERS OF A CENTURY

story by LEAH M. CHARNEY

photographs by JOSHUA HARDIN



Two stalwarts of the Cherry Cricket: chef Horacio Viramontes and the neon sign.

As the bagpipers played *Amazing Grace*, pallbearers carried three tiny caskets to the middle of the room. When the kitchen hood of the Cherry Cricket caught fire the night before Thanksgiving 2016, restaurant patrons and staff were safely evacuated. But it was a day and a half before the Denver Fire Department gave employees the go-ahead to come back for the fish. Miraculously, the three cichlids were the only permanent losses.

And so, following months of repairs before the restaurant's reopening, a video posted to social media memorialized the Irish wake sending the fish off to "burger paradise – in style."

Since Mary Zimmerman first erected the building in 1945 to serve workers coming off shifts at Denver's city dump – the site of today's Cherry Creek Shopping Center – Cherry Cricket has developed a bit of a reputation in Denver's now-posh Cherry Creek North neighborhood.

Surrounded by boutique hotels, high-priced condos and fine-dining establishments, the restaurant refuses to give up

its unpretentious roots and continues to dish up burgers and beers, with no frills, no reservations needed and definitely no white tablecloths.

Comfort food rules at "The Cricket," as it's known to anyone who isn't a tourist or new in town. Aside from a few specials like the burger of the month, the menu and overwhelming assortment of burger toppings rarely, if ever, change. Alongside classics like fried mac and cheese bites, cobb salad and its famous Cricket burgers, are Colorado twists like award-winning green chile or hush puppies made of fried mashed potatoes and jalapeños.

For almost 75 years – minus those 139 days the fire forced it to close – the Cricket has provided reassurance (beyond the food) in the form of cozy booths, wood paneling and a hockey rink affixed to the ceiling that famous people are asked to sign.

In the aftermath of the flames, long-time patrons begged the owners and staff not to remodel or redecorate and put the Cricket back together exactly as it was pre-fire. "We didn't change anything,"





said kitchen manager Horacio Viramontes, who started in 2001 as a line cook. “We changed the bathrooms,” said General Manager Heidi Ziepprecht, laughing.

Though a second, shinier location opened in the Ballpark neighborhood near Coors Field in 2018, the original Cherry Creek restaurant at East Second Avenue was restored back to comfortable, broken-in glory.

Hosting a fish funeral is only natural for the self-proclaimed “Black Sheep of the Creek.” Look for the telltale neon sign, put up in 1957, a beacon in the dark telling you that the Cherry Cricket – and that burger you’ve been dreaming of – will always be here. 🍔

## REUBEN BURGER

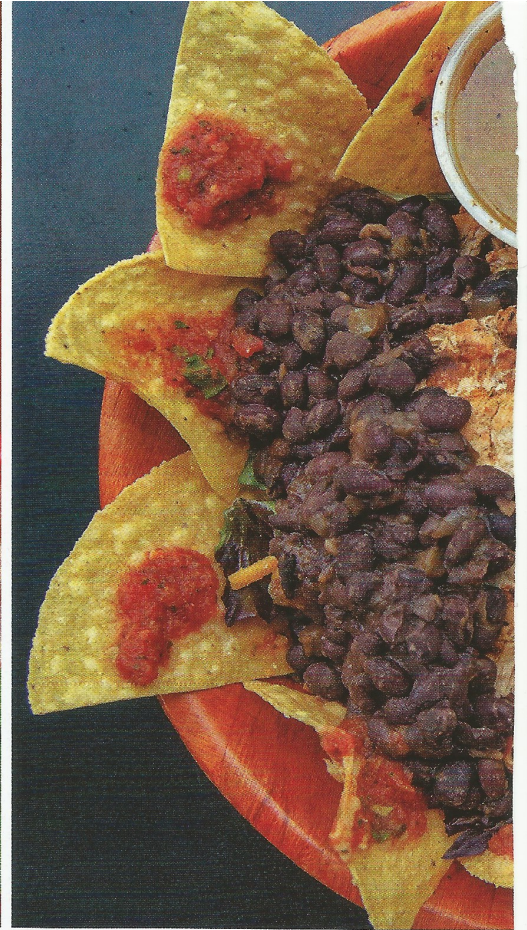
*This specialty burger is a favorite around St. Patrick’s Day, as it combines the deliciousness of a freshly grilled burger with the festive flavors of a holiday staple. It surfaces on the Cherry Cricket’s menu only occasionally, but those in the know can order it off-menu, no secret password required.*

Make four 8-oz patties. Season with salt and pepper. Grill to preferred doneness, flipping only once. Place each hamburger on a bun and top with one slice Swiss cheese, 4 oz corned beef, 2 oz sauerkraut and 1 Tbsp Thousand Island dressing.

- 2 lbs 80/20 Angus ground beef
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 4 brioche buns
- 1 lb lean corned beef, sliced
- 8 oz sauerkraut
- 4 Tbsp Thousand Island dressing
- 4 1-oz slices Swiss cheese

Serves 4





## FIRE BELLY BURGER

*This legendary burger, served the first month the restaurant reopened following the fire, was created in honor of the firefighters who saved the Cricket from total disaster. Thought it's a special "sometimes" burger now, diners can grab a commemorative T-shirt, with a portion of shirt sales going to the Denver Fire Department Foundation.*

Make four 8-oz patties. Season with salt and pepper. Grill to your preferred doneness, flipping only once. Slather bottom half of each bun with 2 oz Strawberry Habanero Cream Cheese. Add a few dashes of hot sauce to mayo and spread on top half of each bun. Place each hamburger on a bun and top with 2 pieces of bacon, several jalapeño slices and a tablespoon each of crispy fried onions.

- 2 lbs 80/20 Angus ground beef
- salt and pepper
- 4 brioche buns
- 8 oz strawberry habanero cream cheese (recipe follows)
- 1/4 cup mayo
- Cholula or other hot sauce, to taste
- 1 jalapeño, seeded, stemmed and sliced
- 8 slices of bacon
- 4 Tbsp fried onion strings

### Strawberry Habanero Cream Cheese

Combine until smooth:

- 8 oz cream cheese
- 1 Tbsp sriracha
- 1/4 tsp habanero (chile) powder
- 2 medium or large strawberries, diced

Serves 4

## SOUTHWEST SALAD

*The spirit of the West in salad form, this is one of the Cherry Cricket's most popular non-burger items. A filling dish perfect for an al fresco dinner on the patio, it also complements the flavors of the Fire Belly Burger as a protein-packed side.*

Ring the side of each bowl with corn chips. Divide lettuce among bowls and top each with a sprinkling of cheese, tomato wedges, avocado slides and black beans. Top with grilled chicken, then drizzle salsa over the top. Serve with poblano vinaigrette on the side.

To make the Poblano Vinaigrette: Add all ingredients except the oil to a blender and mix until well-combined. Slowly add oil to emulsify. Store leftover dressing for up to four days.





- 20 corn chips
- 10 oz lettuce, roughly chopped
- 2 oz shredded Cheddar cheese
- 2 oz shredded Monterey Jack cheese
- 6 tomato wedges
- 1/2 avocado, cut into 4 slices
- 6 oz cooked black beans, seasoned with cilantro and lime to taste
- 2 chicken breasts, seasoned with adobo seasoning and grilled
- Salsa fresca (pico de gallo to taste)

**Poblano Vinaigrette**

- 1 tomato, roasted and peeled
- 1/4 poblano, roasted, peeled and seeded
- 2 large garlic cloves, peeled
- 1 cup red wine vinegar
- 1/4 cup lime juice
- 1/4 cup honey
- 1/2 Tbsp salt
- 1 1/2 Tbsp Dijon mustard
- 1 tsp ground black pepper
- 1/2 Tbsp dried oregano
- 1/2 bunch fresh cilantro
- 2 1/2 cups olive oil

Serves 2 (meal) or 4 (side)

## PUMPKIN BREAD PUDDING

*This delectable dessert ushers us from summer to fall in each delightful bite.*

Preheat oven to 350°. In a large bowl, mix all wet ingredients, plus salt, and stir well to combine. Add bread to mix, stirring gently to ensure bread is evenly coated. Pour into a 13-by-9-inch baking pan, packing bread mixture evenly. Bake 45 minutes.

Cut, drizzle caramel and white chocolate topping over each portion. Top with dollop of fresh whipped cream and healthy sprinkling of candied pecans.

- 1 15-oz can pumpkin
- 4 eggs, lightly beaten
- 1 tsp vanilla
- 5 cups milk
- 1/4 cup heavy cream
- 3 tsp salt
- 2 lbs brioche buns, cut into cubes
- Caramel topping (such as Smucker's)
- White chocolate topping (such as Ghirardelli)
- Whipped cream
- Candied pecans

Serves 8-12

