



Revealed: Charlie Burger's true identity

James Chatto

Published Friday, Jul. 22, 2011 06:04PM EDT

Last updated Thursday, Sep. 06, 2012 10:23AM EDT

I first met Charlie Burger a year ago, in England. Word had spread that the elusive host was holding one of his guerrilla dinners at St. John, chef Fergus Henderson's justifiably renowned London restaurant. The opportunity was too good to miss. I was a serious fan of Mr. Henderson's no-nonsense, nose-to-tail cooking, and also of the concept of Charlie's Burgers: unique not-for-profit dinners staged every month or two in a different, secret and unexpected location. Selected guests were sent the menu and wine list and told how much cash to bring and where and when to show up - at a street corner, perhaps, or a shady bar or a public phone where other instructions would lead them to the actual venue.

In the two years since its inception there had been more than a dozen evenings, all held in downtown Toronto; this was the first international venture for Charlie's Burgers and for once the rendezvous was an actual restaurant. This time Charlie would be sitting with the guests and we were all on our honour not to tell the world who he was.

A great deal of speculation already surrounded his identity. Guesses ran the gamut from celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay to Toronto sommelier Jamie Drummond. One foodie forum declared there was no Charlie Burger, just a posse of industry insiders; another one had even fingered me. The whole thing went global in May, 2010, when the American magazine *Food & Wine* named Charlie's Burgers number 3 out of its 100 best new food and drink experiences in the world. The CB website was

flooded with 4,000 e-mails from 27 different countries - all eager foodies hoping to be invited to an event.

That night in London, however, our group was barely a dozen, mostly Canadians either living or staying in London. Punctually at 8 o'clock, Charlie arrived and shook my hand - a good-looking man of 30 wearing Marc Jacobs jeans, Bruno Magli loafers and a crisp, white shirt, and sporting designer stubble. He looked vaguely familiar - oh yes, he had been one of the waiters at the only other CB event I had attended, a year earlier in Toronto.

The St. John dinner was a merry one. Mr. Henderson's meal wowed us all - huge, messy devilled crabs that we ate with our fingers, ramekins of unctuous jellied pig's trotters, perfectly textured tripe and onions, a watercress salad with capers and shallots, a peppery buck rarebit of toasted cheese with a poached egg on top, and a finale of ice cream made with Fernet Branca and crème de menthe. I was dying to find out more about Charlie's Burgers but appreciation for the food hijacked the conversation.

"That always happens," said our host, with the broadest of smiles. "The evening may start with people talking about the mysterious way they got to the event and wondering who Charlie is but it quickly becomes all about the food and the wines and the chef. That's mission accomplished for me."

Meet the real Charlie

Charlie's real name is Franco Stalteri and his day job is director of experiential marketing for Your Brand Integrated Marketing Communications. He puts together high-end events for banks or luxury car companies or other prestigious clients such as Dom Perignon Champagne.

Food has been a lifelong passion. Though he was born and raised in Toronto, his mother is French and his father Italian and young Franco grew up fluent in both languages, as well as English. Summers were spent on his great-uncle's farm in Normandy - "he had rabbits and made his own Calvados, his own foie gras" - or on his grandmother's property in southern Italy - "she pressed her own olive oil and I remember getting up early every day and going outside to pick fresh figs."

Mr. Stalteri got a degree at the University of Toronto and then joined Lecours Wolfson, a firm of executive headhunters that specialized in finding chefs for top-quality establishments. His days were filled with conversations with and about North America's leading chefs - Wolfgang Puck and Daniel Boulud, David Lee in Toronto, Rob Feenie and Pino Posteraro in Vancouver. He also spoke to the best sous chefs - men and women with extraordinary talent who were often the driving forces of their restaurants but frustratingly unable to express themselves while cooking another chef's menu. That's where the idea for Charlie's Burgers was born - offer a great sous chef an opportunity to create a liberatingly imaginative dinner for, say, 50 guests, with perfectly chosen wines in a private venue, not a restaurant. Guests would pay only food and wine costs; waiters and cooks would all volunteer their services.

"At that point I approached a few good friends," Mr. Stalteri recalls. "We went out for lunch at Tutti Matti in Toronto and I explained the idea. They all said, 'You know, yeah, I like it!' " These confederates brought their own skills to the project. Wine importer Donato Carozza used his global contacts to source rare and unique wines. Restaurateur Peter Soltesz provided know-how and logistics when a kitchen had to be built in an art gallery or disused bakery; Andres Marquez, co-owner of the Milagro restaurants, took over those duties when Mr. Soltesz moved to the Caribbean. Vito Marinuzzi, owner of the 7 Numbers restaurants was another great set-up man in the early days.

The name was an accident. "No one had any good ideas," Mr. Stalteri says, "but someone said it should be something fun, like Charlie's Burgers. I said, Fine - but not that! Then one day our Web

guy phoned to say he was registering the domain at that very moment and needed a name and someone had mentioned Charlie's Burgers. So it just happened."

The [website](#) was instrumental in fostering the CB myth. Deliberately uninformative, it simply told the curious to leave their e-mail address. Those who did received a questionnaire to be filled in by would-be guests who would then be informed when a new event was imminent. Half the guest list would be picked on a first-come-first-served basis, the other half chosen randomly, with interesting answers taken into account. Mr. Stalteri denies that the process is elitist or exclusive. "It just helped us determine people's likes and dislikes so we could fit them into an appropriate event."

Very rarely does a guest get invited to more than one CB event, a way of making sure it doesn't end up as some sort of private club. Even the game of getting to the venue has a practical purpose. Some guests have tried to scalp their tickets; others show up with a bunch of friends. The wild goose chase lets the team control who reaches the final destination.

An auspicious beginning

The first event, in February, 2009, featured chef Marco Zandona from Via Allegro and took place in the vast underground **Fine Wine Reserve** on King Street West, an eerie maze where private wine collectors store their treasures. Mr. Stalteri himself greeted the 20 guests at a door marked "Control Room," using a fingerprint reader and electronic pass card to admit them.

Even Mr. Stalteri, famously obsessive where detail is concerned, acknowledged it was a complete success. It might have seemed counterintuitive to be offering dinners for up to \$185 just as the recession was taking hold, but instead it was precisely the right, exhilaratingly flamboyant gesture for the times. Gourmets loved the idea of a chef being given total freedom. The media seized on the notions of mystery locations and an anonymous "Charlie's Angels-style" host. Word of mouth was all the advertising that was needed.

For me, the real appeal of Charlie's Burgers is in the elegance of its conception. It's cool without being arrogant, more tongue-in-cheek than pompous. After the intriguing fun of finding the venue there is the social game of negotiating a room full of refreshingly unfamiliar people, all of whom share an interest in fine food and wine. And the food is very fine. That's the substance within the style. Occasionally, it's also newsworthy. One chef chose to use bugs and insects as his proteins, bringing a predictable ooh-la-la from the press; another flew in a side of Kobe beef from Japan while a third brought whale meat to the table. Sometimes a celebrity guest might steal a small peal of thunder. Chef Susur Lee showed up at one event. His only criticism was that Charlie Burger should charge twice as much as he did.

Mr. Stalteri nods. "People say charge more or make it bigger or franchise it, but it is what it is. Because it's not my full-time job there is no need to grow it or change it. And we all agreed early on that we wouldn't take ourselves too seriously. The planning and logistics, yes, and the excellence of the food and wine, of course. But the purpose of it all is to have a good time and educate a little."

Scores of people have found out Charlie Burger's identity and kept the secret. Why reveal himself now? Mr. Stalteri gives a little shrug. "No real reason. It has run its course. It will make some aspects of organizing these dinners a little bit easier for me but basically nothing will change."

James Chatto is a food writer based in Toronto.