

I Found the Best Burger Place in America. And Then I Killed It.

thrillist.com/eat/portland/stanichs-closed-will-it-reopen-burger-quest

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Stanich's -- Portland, Oregon | Emiliano Ponzi/Thrillist

In my office, I have a coffee mug from Stanich's in Portland, Oregon. Under the restaurant name, it says "Great hamburgers since 1949." The mug was given to me by Steve Stanich on the day I told him that, after eating 330 burgers during a 30-city search, I was naming Stanich's cheeseburger the best burger in America. That same day, we filmed a short video to announce my pick. On camera, Stanich cried as he talked about how proud his parents would be. After the shoot, he handed me the mug, visibly moved. "My parents are thanking you from the grave," he said, shaking my hand vigorously. When I left, I felt light and happy. I'd done a good thing.

Five months later, in a story in *The Oregonian*, restaurant critic Michael Russell detailed how Stanich's had been forced to shut down. In the article, Steve Stanich called my burger award a curse, "the worst thing that's ever happened to us." He told a story about the country music singer Tim McGraw showing up one day, and not being able to serve him because there was a five hour wait for a burger. On January 2, 2018, Stanich shut down the restaurant for what he called a "two week deep cleaning." Ten months later, Stanich's is still closed. Now when I look at the Stanich's mug in my office, I no longer feel light and happy. I feel like I've done a bad thing.



For the past year, the story of Stanich's has haunted me. For most of that time, I'd been away from Thrillist, as I worked on a book that frequently took me to Portland. Each time I was there, my story would somehow find a way into conversation, like the one with my Lyft driver who asked if I liked burgers. Yes, I said tentatively. "Well, we had a great one here," he said, as we drove over the Burnside Bridge. "But then some asshole from California ruined it." Or the time, while sitting at the bar at Clyde Common, the bartender came up to me and in a soft, friendly voice inquired if I'd planned on closing any more burger restaurants while I was in town.

As this sort of thing became more frequent, I started, possibly in an attempt to deflect personal responsibility, to think a whole lot about lists.

We are a nation of lists and ranks and bests. As a [2013 New Yorker article](#) explained, our mind focuses when things on a page or screen change, which is why bullet points and numbered lists help us process information more effectively (this is part of the reason no one makes grocery paragraphs). But the most important part of the article revolves around a 2011 psychological study on the "paradox of choice."



In the digital age, where every bit of information is available at any point in time and that overwhelming fact alone can render any person frozen in indecision for weeks, the study found things that allow us to make decisions faster, like lists, also make us happier. Knowing you can accomplish something, even if it's as simple as reading a list, is pleasurable.

On top of that, our never-ending buffet of information has led us to reason that we must make the most of our time away from the information superhighway, and that time should only be spent doing the best things. So naturally, the best lists are lists of “bests.”

Centuries ago (2014), when Facebook’s algorithm overlords promoted the idea of Facebook becoming everyone’s “personalized newspaper,” “best” lists flourished in a way that, like the steroid era in baseball, seems in retrospect almost hilariously false, but the traffic gains looked real, so everyone made more lists. Except there was a slight problem: good, sturdy, reliable lists requiring on the ground knowledge and reporting were actually hard/expensive to make, and few places wanted to pay for that sort of reporting, so most lists just ended up plagiarizing off of the few good ones. And, as these lists increased in frequency while simultaneously decreasing in quality, you watched the collective trust in any one list diminish. Comment sections turned cynical, “this is clickbait!” being the most common refrain, then outright ugly and hostile as discourse on the internet has devolved into a garbage fire inside a waste processing plant atop a landfill built on a massive skunk burial ground.

And then, of course, Facebook decided everyone should pivot to video.

It was during this *Mad Max* dystopian content scene that I came up with Burger Quest, which I’d imagined as an antidote to the lists pervading the internet. No one knows who to trust anymore, I’d argued, because everyone is just copying everyone else’s reporting. What if I personally travelled the country and tried all the burgers myself? To my shock, they said yes. And to my body’s shock, a year later, after traveling to 30 cities and eating 330 burgers, I put out a list of the 100 best burgers in the country with Stanich’s in Portland, Oregon ranking as number one.

I liked everything about Stanich’s the moment I walked in, from the old pennants on the wall, to the surly locals drinking cheap beers. Then, of course, I had the burger and fell in love. It had every element I craved: the griddled thin patty, the caramelized onions, the oozy American cheese. And the way it was built -- the thoughtfulness of red relish and mayo on one side and the mustard mixture on the other -- helped turn it into something greater than the sum of its parts. But when it came time to pick the number one place, I can’t pretend that the stuff I noticed when I first walked in, the, ugh, *authenticity* of the place didn't help push it to the top of the list. In the over-saturated, over-extra food world we currently reside in, wall art not from a local graffiti artist, and a beer list not put together by a cicerone, and a color scheme not picked out by a nationally lauded design firm feels almost refreshing. Stanich’s burger could compete with any burger place in the country, but I’d be lying if I said the narrative didn’t push it over the top.

From a content perspective, my final list overachieved. It got the proper number of engagements, and shares, and clicks, and all the other analytics boss folks use in the Billy Beane Moneyball era of journalism, and the video with Steve Stanich joyfully weeping got

millions of views and I got to go on podcasts and radio shows and be interviewed by local newspapers. People could disagree with my picks (and they did!), but they couldn't call what I'd done clickbait. I'd done the work. I'd made a good list.

But then, a month or so later, a different sort of story emerged. The first was in Seattle, where the local restaurant critic wrote about Loretta's Northwesterner (No. 4 on my top 100), a small local bar that was now being overrun by burger tourists. I heard from friends in Chicago of the many grumblings at Mott Street (No. 7) where people were waiting hours for the bar-only burger while tables in the restaurant sat open. And then came Stanich's.



"Successful people don't blame others" | Emiliano Ponzi/Thrillist

On October 9, 2018, I called Steve Stanich. After the Oregonian story, I'd promised myself that if Stanich's was still closed when I returned to work, I'd go up there myself and see what was happening. And sure enough, when I got back on the job in September, Stanich's was still closed. I knew I had to go up there. And to do that, I knew I had to call Stanich.

Have you ever had to make a phone call you've absolutely dreaded? Have you ever had acute stress dreams relating to that phone call for weeks, and found yourself visualizing scenarios in which it would go poorly while absentmindedly preparing your children's dinner? Have you ever stared at an



elderly woman with weepy eyes and arthritic hips walking her dog down your street and felt irrational pangs of jealousy because you knew she didn't have to make a stressful phone call that day?

The day before I flew to Portland, after staring at his number for 15 minutes and saying to myself "just do it, just call, who cares, just call, life is meaningless" I called Steve Stanich.

He didn't answer, but his voicemail message nearly broke me, "Hi you've reached Steve Stanich of Stanich's, the home of great hamburgers since 1949, please leave a message and we hope to see you soon. May god bless you and yours."

He called me back four hours later. Stanich didn't seem angry as much as just surprised I'd reached out. He told me to come straight from the airport in the morning to his office behind the restaurant. There, he said, he'd "tell me the whole damn story."

The next day, armed with a backpack and debilitating anxiety, I got on a plane and flew to Portland.

Because I can't make sense of anything on my own, I started talking to restaurant critics across the country about what responsibility we have to preserve the places we write about and direct crowds of eager food tourists to experience. I wasn't interested in the fates of new restaurants named to "best new restaurant" lists, because modern restaurants would almost always view that as a best-case scenario. I was more curious to talk to folks who'd spotlighted old joints, the analog restaurants operating in today's digital world. And almost everyone said they'd often provide some sort of heads up. "I often think about our duty to warn,"

Houston Chronicle restaurant critic Alison Cook told me. "Mostly because, when we've neglected to, it's ended up being a shitshow."

But beyond a heads up, I wondered if they ever actually considered not writing about a place to not, for lack of a better phrase, "blow it up." Brett Anderson, at the New Orleans Times-Picayune, said that, before and at the beginning of his tenure, this was something that went on. "My predecessor wrote about a restaurant she loved without naming it," he said. "I'd never go that far, but before Bourdain and Fieri and the proliferation of listicles, there was certainly a lot more internal hand-wringing around 'do we share every last precious secret we have with our readers?' But now in the social media age, there's no incentive to withhold. It just takes one Anderson Cooper tweet, and your favorite po' boy place is packed for months." He tells the story of Willie Mae's Scotch House, a soul food restaurant in the Treme



neighborhood known for its fried chicken. “It was always delicious, but never really crowded,” he said. “But then it started appearing on all these national lists, and now, no matter the day, you’ve got to get there before 11am if you don’t want to wait two hours.”

The *Oregonian* restaurant critic Michael Russell told me about a little ceviche place in Portland. Its chef Jose Luis de Cossio had cooked at the greatest ceviche restaurant in Peru, and opened fancy places in America, but tired of all that, and opened a tiny 23 seat ceviche place named Paiche in a desolate section of Southwest Portland. He’d wanted it to be small and serve the neighborhood and allow him time to surf and lead a balanced life.

But there was a problem: it was too good.

Willamette Week named Paiche its 2016 restaurant of the year. It made The *Oregonian*’s best restaurants list. Portland Monthly gave it a great review. Despite de Cossio’s wishes, it became a destination restaurant. So he changed it. He got rid of dinner service. And the ceviche. And made it just a breakfast and lunch cafe with a focus on coffee. He wasn’t interested in serving the “narrow kind of customer” that populated his restaurant. He was more interested, he said, in returning it to the neighborhood.

Texas Monthly’s 50 best barbecue list is famous. Every four or five years, the entire editorial staff crisscrosses the state of Texas and attempts to eat at every single barbecue restaurant in the Lone Star state. From there, they compile a list of the 50 best and announce the top 10 in a special sort of ceremony, culminating in a new number one best barbecue place in the state (and thus, a biased guy born in Texas might argue, also the country).

I called up Patricia Sharpe, their food editor, who has written for the magazine since 1974 and helped shape every single barbecue research list. I wanted to ask her about their 2008 list, when they chose a completely unknown joint called Snow’s BBQ as the best in Texas. Snow’s, open only on the weekend because the pit master Tootsie Tomanetz was a janitor at the local school, became an immediate national sensation and I wondered if Sharpe thought about the part she played in changing the folks involved in Snow’s lives.

“We know we have this outsize effect,” she said, mentioning how folks would start showing up within hours of stories publishing, with specific foods that had been lauded all highlighted. “And with Snow’s, I believe our publisher warned them to buy more supplies, but, at some point, there’s a limit on responsibility, especially because the types of stories that actually alter a business are so few and far between.”



“You can prep a place as much as you want,” she said, “but once you put it into the world, it’s out of your hands.”

On a weirdly warm, sunny October day in Portland, I got out of the cab from the airport in front of Stanich’s and stood staring at the giant wooden Stanich’s sign on the side of the old brick building. The red picnic tables where I’d sat and eaten my first Stanich’s burger were peeling, revealing the wood underneath.

“This restaurant is closed,” announced my puzzled cab driver as I paid him. “You know this?”

“I do, yes,” I said.

Taped to the door of the restaurant was a handwritten sign in neat cursive confirming this fact: “*Stanich’s Since 1949 is Closed. :(*

We Hope to Open Soon! :)

Thank You for Your Loyal Patronage!!!

*Steve Stanich + Family
Sept. 2018”*

Unsure where to go, I called Stanich. “Hey Kevin,” he said, “I’m in the office behind the restaurant. Come up, the door is open.”

To get to Steve Stanich’s office, you walked past Stanich’s to the boxy brown building behind it, went in the door, stepped over three different welcome mats stacked on top of each other, passed two containers of weed killer, and a sign leaning against the wall that said “Boycott” and went up a brown carpeted staircase being careful not to knock over the empty wine decanter sitting on the third step.

Steve sat at a desk in lime green shorts and a button down shirt with hula dancers on it. He still had the broad shoulders of the former Santa Clara college football captain he once was, and his slightly pained movements suggested a full-contact athletic past. His office looked like a tornado hit an Office Max then dumped supplies directly into a college dorm room. An unmade bed sat in one corner of the room surrounded by photos of people who’d come into the restaurant, like former Oakland Raiders football star Lyle Alzado and boxer Muhammed Ali, plus a framed image of Steve’s father George on the cover of a 1985 This Week magazine with the caption “George Stanich: The man and the legendary hamburger.” In the window, there were two signs: “Don’t sweat the small stuff: In the end, it’s all small stuff” and



“Complaint Department <- 1000 miles away.” On a circular wooden table in the middle of the room sat stacks of manilla folders, as well as a can of Flying Insect Raid, a Febreze spray bottle, and a sign announcing “Smoking at these 3 tables only.”

We started to talk. Well, that’s slightly inaccurate. You don’t talk with Steve Stanich, at least not in the traditional sense. He swirls around you with a never-ending stream of catch phrases and small canned stories and facts. He tells me how the meth epidemic in Portland has been taken over by the heroin epidemic and how eight people a day are dying of overdoses and how truckers are being offered \$100k a year jobs but they can’t pass the drug tests. He talks about infrastructure issues in San Francisco and the homeless problem and how folks from San Francisco are driving up rents in Portland, and he offers up a veritable buffet of catch phrases from “he who acts in haste can repent in leisure” to his version of K.I.S.S. -- “keep it simple if you’re stupid or smart” and after each anecdote or story is shaped, he will say “you with me?” or “you dig?” or “why you laughing?” even if you’re not laughing, and so you will find yourself in a sort of call and response trance that is singular and genuinely hard to shake. He is his own perpetual filibuster.

At one point, while in the middle of a monologue, an older woman appeared in the office and asked Stanich when they planned to open. For six minutes (I timed it on my phone) he went through a variety of the talking points we’d covered (heroin, traffic, California, etc.) while she patiently stood there until he eventually got around to some form of “I’m weighing my options” and she quickly hopped in to say, “Well, I’m rooting for you” and left. This seemed like my opening, so I used the brief transition.

“What happened with the restaurant, Steve?”

He starts off by telling me that it’s not my fault, that back in 1987 when they opened a Stanich’s on the west side, they had 500 people in line waiting to get in, and that was a real crowd. This, in comparison, was nothing much. And besides, he said, successful people don’t blame others. They want others to succeed too. But then he told me what I’d done to his business.

Apparently, after my story came out, crowds of people started coming in the restaurant, people in from out of town, or from the suburbs, basically just non-regulars. And as the lines started to build up, his employees -- who were mainly family members -- got stressed out, and the stress would cause them to not be as friendly as they should be, or to shout out crazy long wait times for burgers in an attempt to maybe convince people to leave, and as this started happening, things fell by the wayside. Dishes weren’t cleared quickly, and these new people weren’t having the proper Stanich’s experience, and Steve would spend his entire day going around apologizing and trying to fix things. They might pay him lip service to his face, but they were never coming back so they had no problem going on Yelp or Facebook and denouncing the restaurant and saying that the burgers were bad. And then the health

department came in and suggested they do some deep cleaning (he still got a 97 rating, he told me), and the combination of all of these factors led Stanich to close down the restaurant for what he genuinely thought would be two weeks.

This, I tell him, actually sounds like it was my fault. I put a target on their back by naming them number one, and that influx of people messed with the way they'd been running the business for decades, and all that could literally be blamed on me, if you were going to blame someone.

"No, no, successful people don't blame others," Stanich told me again, though this time he wasn't looking at me.

And then, in a quieter voice, he started to explain why it wasn't just two weeks. He asked me not to reveal the details of that story, but I can say that there were personal problems, the type of serious things that can happen with any family, and would've happened regardless of how crowded Stanich's was, and that real life is always more complicated and messier than we want it to be. Stanich explained that, as these issues were going on in the background, it was hard to read the social media screeds attacking them, and listen to the answering machine messages at the restaurant calling him a fat fuck and telling him to fuck himself for closing his own restaurant. He didn't care about them, he insisted. He only cared about people like that woman who'd shown up, the regulars who live in NE Portland. "I need to take care of the people who took care of me," he said. "They don't turn on you."

This was the same sentiment the chef at Paiche had expressed, and that I'd heard from others. If there was one main negative takeaway from the raging fires of food tourist culture and the lists fanning the flames, it was that the people crowding the restaurant were one time customers. They were there to check off a thing on a list, and put it on Instagram. They weren't invested in the restaurant's success, but instead in having a public facing opinion of a well known place. In other words, they had nothing to lose except money and the restaurant had nothing to gain except money, and that made the entire situation feel both precarious and a little gross.



"I have to take care of the people who took care of me" | Emiliano Ponzi/Thrillist

When Steve Stanich opened his restaurant's door, I felt myself get dizzy. The place was immaculate and eery, a ghost restaurant in waiting. Stanich showed me all the new things he'd put in while they'd been closed, and how they'd fixed up the bathrooms, and told me about how he's kept on the coolers and the ice machines and everything this entire time, because if you shut that stuff down for long periods it will break. So he'd basically been paying the bills as if the place was open the last nine months, except he wasn't making any money, and now he needed to figure out what to do.



The way Stanich sees it, he has two options: he can either partner with another restaurant operator to open it back up, or he can franchise. Both options are on the table, and he needs to decide what to do, but until that time, Stanich's will likely not re-open. And no matter what happens, in all likelihood, the Stanich's that had been open since 1949, the Stanich's that I fell in love with, then clumsily broke like Lennie with the puppy in *Of Mice and Men*, will never be the same again.

And that fact is the thing I can't quite get past. That a decision I made for a list I put on the internet has impacted a family business and forever altered its future. That I have changed family dynamics and relationships. And it could very easily happen again.

I've been asking myself what the other side of this looks like. How do I do this better? Is there a way to celebrate a place without the possibility of destroying it? Or is this just what we are now -- a horde with a checklist and a camera phone, intent on self-producing the destruction of anything left that feels real, one Instagram story at a time?

Clearly, I don't have an answer. I understand there are larger forces involving tourism and technology and society writ large at play here, and I'm not enough of a hypocrite to turn this into a morality play about the internet and the consequences of our actions, but maybe if we were all as kind to each other as Steve Stanich has been to me, we might just survive this apocalyptic puddle of shit we currently find ourselves in.

Before I left, Stanich told me he had one more thing to show me.

He walked me out behind the office to the vast green of the Rose City Cemetery. There, not more than twenty five yards away, lay the graves of his parents, George and Gladys Stanich. As we stood and stared down at the black gravestone, Stanich told me a story about how his parents had started the restaurant in 1949 to help pay hospital bills after he was born prematurely. He was wistful and philosophical and clearly in pain, but it wasn't a pain he wanted to reveal to me in detail, and I wasn't one to ask anything of Steve Stanich except forgiveness, so I tried again to apologize for putting in motion a series of changes he wasn't asking for. He looked at me for the first time since we were out at his parents grave, and gave a quick nod, then he started to hobble off back towards the restaurant.

He'd forgotten, he said, to close it back up.

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