

Compared to South St. and Hero, Lick's offers a dizzying array of products, ranging from veggie shepherd's pie to steak sandwiches and turkey burgers. Meehan, who invented the famed veggie burger in her kitchen 15 years ago, says the strategy works. "That's the thing that's kept Lick's in the forefront of this burger competition. We've always offered something new."

That doesn't mean she won't take a few cues from other fast-food companies.

Inside the boardroom at Lick's corporate office in the Beach, the east wall is covered with images of fast-food outlets; Hero is there, but South St. snapshots are missing.

Meehan is studying the next phase of Lick's: the express model. The set-up will be smaller, similar to the fast-food kiosks found in major malls, and the focus will be on burgers rather than ice cream. "We feel that we will be able to open more stores more aggressively," Meehan says.

She is confident the new shops popping up across T.O. are just healthy competition: "I don't feel threatened by it. I think people will judge what the quality is and I think it's pretty obvious."

Quality is what got "foodie" and Hero founder John Lettieri to enter the fight for burger supremacy in Toronto in late 2003.

The founder of the Lettieri chain of espresso bars and cafés comes from the family that founded Tre Stelle Cheese. In 1991, he started the Lettieri chain, which today has 14 locations across the GTA.

The Hero Certified franchise has grown to 10 locations. "We'll open between five and 10 this year and 10 to 15 next year," Lettieri is also looking into opening corporate stores.

Like the strapping six-foot-plus Lettieri, Hero's decor has a laid-back, rugged feel — it resembles a cross between a corporate coffee shop and a slightly upscale saloon.

Part of Hero's claim to fame is free range, hormone-free and antibiotic-free beef. "We are having a huge response with the natural element of the meat," Lettieri says. "I don't know what other people put in their burgers. I just know what we don't put in our burgers and no one else seems to have that claim."

Of the competition, he says: "I think it's good for the business." He says he respects Lick's for its long-time success in the category, and says South St.'s launch has been a strong one.

"I tend to attract the more aggressive competition," Meehan notes from Lick's HQ. "Which is good."

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