Relishing a burger topped with foie gras leisurely with forks and knives in a luxurious environment with crystal chandelier, sleek furniture and modernist decor is a special experience found in a restaurant that specialises in burgers.

The emergence of these kinds of high-end burger restaurants in Hong Kong revolutionises burgers from budget fast food into a fine dining item.
The interiors of the toilet are glamorous.

Nearly HK$6 million was invested in Duke’s Burgers.

The burger restaurant, Duke’s Burger, situated in Central’s trendy Soho neighbourhood, has invested nearly HK$6 million in its decoration and special arrangement, involving groovy music and mood lighting.

“I am drawn to the idea of reinventing the cuisine of burger as a fine dining experience,” said Andre Fu, an international renowned architect who designed the interiors of Duke’s Burger. “The concept to create a cozy and edgy dining salon thus came to my mind.”

Fu said though Duke’s Burger only has a size of 470 square feet, a sumptuous environment was created to match with the concept of fine dining. “We have taken time to choose the background music, the layout design of the menu, the cutlery and the waiters’ uniforms to ensure the entire concept flows,” he said.

A new etiquette for burger dining is promoted in Duke’s Burgers.

Duke’s Burger provides eight choices of burgers at prices from HK$140 to HK$280, with Braised U.S. Short Ribs & Truffles Burger topped with foie gras, goose liver, being the most expensive at HK$280. Side dishes, including fries, salads and desserts, cost from HK$10 to HK$80.

Each type of burger at Duke’s Burger has a different bun, but they are all open sandwiches: there are bottom buns, but no top buns.

The chef at Duke’s Burger prepares the dishes with fresh ingredients purchased daily. The sauces are also tailor-made by the chef, who takes more than two days to prepare them.

Another burger restaurant, the British-styled Burger Republic, also promotes burgers as a high-quality food. “Our concept is to let customers sit down comfortably and enjoy the meal slowly,” said Peter Tsang Pui-shan, owner of Burger Republic.

Tsang came back from the United Kingdom eight years ago and opened his dream restaurant because of boredom with office work.

Tsang said dining at Burger Republic would not be fast. “All things are freshly made after ordering and you have to wait for at least 10 minutes,” he said.

Unlike traditional fast food shops where customers have to queue up to order and get their food in trays by themselves, customers in Burger Republic are served by waiters who take orders for them.

Michael Wong Kwok-fai, the executive chef, said the burgers they offer are freshly prepared and have unique Canadian taste. “What differentiates us from other burger restaurants is the taste,” Wong said.

“Another characteristic of our food is the large portion,” Wong said. As implied in the name, burgers at Big Bite are big. A kind of burgers at Big Bite are sold from HK$36 to HK$80.

Wendy, who declined to give her full name, came to Big Bite based on recommendations from her friends even though the restaurant is far from her home. “The taste is okay,” she said. “You can notice it (the shop) is not following any formula like other chain restaurants.”

“In their (American’s) eyes, burgers are really something.”

Customers like the freshness of burgers at Burger Republic most, despite the comparatively long waiting time.

Ryan Andrews, an American, said he had a good experience at Burger Republic as the burgers there were fresher than those from other fast food chain stores. “The burger tastes good. The price is reasonable and the environment is open and comfortable,” he said.

Big Bite, a Canadian burger restaurant, also emphasises the freshness of burgers. “The Canadian burgers must be homemade,” said Joseph Chan, owner of Big Bite. Chan worked as a manager in a burger restaurant in Canada before opening the shop.

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Sandy Wong, public relations officer of McDonald’s Restaurants (Hong Kong) Limited, refused to comment on the latest trend of high-end burgers and upcoming strategies of McDonald’s in response to this new trend due to confidentiality.

Anson Mak Hot-shan, instructor of Department of Cultural and Religious Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), said burgers have been fine dining items for a long time. “In foreign countries, burgers do not necessarily refer to cheap food,” she said.

Mak said hamburgers are often the main dishes for Americans. “In their (American’s) eyes, burgers are really something,” she said.

But in Hong Kong, hamburgers are usually associated with food sold cheaply at fast food chain stores, Mak added. Burgers have been a kind of low-end food in Hong Kong since the 70s, when they were sold at mini tuck shops near piers, she continued.

Mak said the concept of high quality burgers did not emerge until now because people in Hong Kong had never been exposed to expensive ingredients for burgers before.

However, Dr. Way Tang Sai-keung, another instructor from the same department in CUHK, said it is unlikely that many people in Hong Kong would enjoy burgers as a fine dining experience.

Tang said local culture differs from American culture as it is more fast-paced in Hong Kong. “It’s difficult for Hong Kong people to slow down and spend time to enjoy a burger,” he said.