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A Place Like No Other for Takeout Like No Other

Taylor's Automatic Refresher

For complicated reasons that can only be touched on here, Californians get fast food, and it's just plain better there than anywhere else; chalk it up to 60 years of experience. When you have chains like In-N-Out Burger, Fatburger, Fosters Freeze, and Tommy's, you see the direct link between fast food and the old lunch counters, where food was cooked to order from perhaps not the best but still-recognizable ingredients. Other fast food does not exactly take you back to Woolworth's in the same way.

Taylor's Automatic Refresher is essentially a lunch counter, but without real service. You order, you wait (seated, if you prefer; they give you little black device that lights up when your order's ready), you go get your tray, and you eat.

So it looks like fast food. But it's not that fast, and it's not all that cheap. It is on occasion so good, however, that you wish this were a direction fast food would take.

You can order an ahi tuna burger, rare, and get it that way, topped with ginger wasabi mayo, which makes me question why anyone would order the wonderful but much-more-common Wisconsin sourdough burger (with bacon, mushrooms, cheddar cheese, mayo and a too-sweet barbecue sauce, it's a combo that seems far more California than Wisconsin to me).

That you can order better-than-average fried squid for six and a half bucks makes me eschew the better-than-average French fries. And the shakes — which include flavors like pistachio and espresso bean — are not merely better than average but truly superior.

This Taylor's is an offspring of the original, which is right smack in the middle of Napa Valley, on Highway 29 in St. Helena, and with its street-side location in the Ferry Building, it's not quite as romantic. But for a fast lunch or dinner (there is a decent selection of wine and beer, too, and unlike most Ferry Building eateries this one is open until 9), you cannot do better.

