

"Best thing we have ordered for our dogs. They love it."

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Just fun on a bun?

Head of RN group protests scanty nurse costumes worn by waitresses at Arizona grill, a `real guy's place'

November 16, 2006 | By Stephen Kiehl | Stephen Kiehl, Sun reporter

The specialty at the Heart Attack Grill in Tempe, Ariz., is a quadruple bypass burger that's stacked high with four half-pound beef patties, cheddar cheese, red onions, bacon, lettuce, tomato and a special sauce.

But it's not the burger's fat content or cholesterol payload that has raised the ire of the Baltimore-based Center for Nursing Advocacy. Rather, it's how the burger is served - by waitresses dressed in revealing, naughty-nurse uniforms.

The waitresses wear stethoscopes around their necks and crosses on their nurse hats. They also wear fishnet stockings and tight, cleavage-baring tops. On occasion, they jump into the arms of their customers.

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Sexually available is not exactly the image that Sandy Summers believes should be projected for those in the caring profession.

A former trauma center nurse, Summers is founder and executive director of the Center for Nursing Advocacy, which polices the portrayal of nurses around the world. The biggest violators, in the center's view, are those who connect nursing with titillation.

That's where the Heart Attack Grill comes in. Summers is pressuring the restaurant to drop its sexy nurse motif and has begun a letter-writing campaign against it.

"The endless association of sex and nurses leads people to believe that maybe nurses really are available to provide for the sexual needs of patients and physicians," Summers says. "It degrades the professional image, it demoralizes practicing nurses and drives any self-respecting person away from considering the profession."

But so far, most of the outrage has been directed at Summers herself. In e-mails, she has been called a "feminazi," a "pathetic liberal whack job" and worse. One critic suggested she rename her group "Advocates for Uptight Women."

The human target of Summers' campaign is Jon Basso, the Heart Attack Grill owner, but he is clearly relishing the whole dust-up. In his mind, he is nothing less than a freedom fighter on behalf of straight men who like women and red meat.

"The nutshell of it is that I'm the press' whipping boy because I'm considered rather repugnant by traditional standards," Basso says in a phone interview from the restaurant. "But I believe I'm within my First Amendment rights to do whatever the hell I want to because it's not Nazi Germany yet. Give it 20 years and it may be."

When Summers tried to recruit real nurses to hand out fliers outside the restaurant, Basso posted on his Web site a photo of firefighters turning fire hoses on Alabama civil rights demonstrators in the 1960s. He digitally erased the faces of the demonstrators and replaced them with Summers' image.

"As men, we had our civil rights ripped from us in the early 1980s, when the women reporters had a right to go into the male locker room after the big game," says Basso, 41. "Women have hair salons, tea parlors. Why do men not have places to go? Why can't I have a place with fries dipped in lard and Marlboros and sexy gals dressed in a fantasy outfit? And if the fantasy happens to be a nurse, who does it offend?"

Basso says his restaurant is "a real guy's place." The menu includes cigarettes, burgers, beer and Flatliner Fries, which are "fried in pure lard." The restaurant, which opened last December, also features a Valentine's Day Massacre on Feb. 14. The event is for single men only, and the waitresses, Basso says, "are a little bit more scantily clad."

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He has devoted his Web site to chronicling his spat with Summers, posting letters from supporters and detractors. He notes with considerable satisfaction that the fight has only improved business. Last week, after CNN carried a report on the debate, Basso said, he had so many customers he ran out of beef by 7 p.m.

The state of Arizona was the first to challenge Basso's "nurses." In September, an assistant state attorney general sent Basso a letter questioning his use of the word "nurse" to describe his waitresses. So as not to confuse people who might think the waitresses are real health-care professionals (they are not), the letter suggested Basso drop the "nurse" from his menu and ads.

Basso complied, to a degree. For those who might not have figured out that his waitresses lack nursing degrees, he put a disclaimer on his Web site, saying, "Heart Attack Grill nurses are NOT REAL NURSES." The waitresses who wear the skimpy nurse outfits say they mean no disrespect to actual nurses. They describe their revealing uniforms as fun and harmless costumes - no more threatening than what children wear for Halloween.

"We're not trying to be rude or disgrace anybody," says Stacey Hoffmann, 23, who has worked at the Heart Attack Grill for a month. "I think nurses are great. It's a wonderful profession. If I had a better stomach, I might go into it myself."

If she had, in fact, she would have followed in the footsteps of her mother and her aunt, both of whom have been nurses. So if anyone respects nursing, Hoffmann says, she does.

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