

I ATE A ROBOT HAMBURGER BEFORE THE RESTAURANT WENT OUT OF BUSINESS

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The future is upon us and the robots will soon take over. Automated cars will put Uber drivers and cabbies alike out of work. Low-wage workers, like the people working behind the counter at McDonalds, will be replaced by burger-flipping robots. The entire operation of Spacely Space Sprockets, Inc. is run by a single man, pressing a single button, for four hours a day. This cartoon future is so fully automated that most people are unemployed, and all productive work is done by robots.

The first jobs to be replaced will be the first jobs teenagers get. These are low skill jobs, and when you think about low skill jobs (certainly not low-effort jobs, by the way), you think of flipping burgers. [That's where Creator comes in](#). They're a culinary robotics company with a restaurant in San Francisco. They've been profiled [by NPR](#), [by Business Insider](#), and [by CNBC](#). TechCrunch [got a sneak preview](#) proclaiming this as the future of the six dollar burger. It is a marvel of engineering prowess with a business model that I don't think checks

out. This is not the robot that will take your job, and I'm proud to say I ate a robot hamburger before the restaurant went out of business.

THE STRANGEST DINING EXPERIENCE YOU'LL EVER HAVE

When I was there — on a Wednesday — Creator was closed. They're only open on Thursdays and Fridays until their 'official' opening. I went back a week later, and found a line of tech bros winding around the corner, and two staff members outside handing out laminated paper menus. Apparently putting a gigantic TV above the counter, like every McDonalds in the country, is too pedestrian.

After waiting in line with a few of my coworkers, we were allowed into Creator where waitstaff with a tablet computer and card reader took our order. The system isn't set up to order several burgers under one check, so my coworkers and I gave our orders individually, and I handed my card to the order taker for each burger. No cash is accepted.

creator.			
CRISP BRIGHT SAVORY INTENSE	Creator vs. The World 🌐🌐🌐🌐 Inspired by the classic California burger but brighter and fresher, our own Pacific Sauce features umesho plum and borrows a few secrets from mole. Topped with a kick, pickles, onions, tomato, lettuce and cheddar. <i>- David Bordow at Creator</i>	6 French Fries crispy skin-on shoe string fries served with Heinz Ketchup	3 Tractor Organic Cola cinnamon, vanilla, kola
	Dad Burger 🌐🌐 Homemade catsup and Hungarian smoked paprika combine with a nutty sunflower seed tahini to make a bright but complex burger. <i>- Chef Nick Gallo, Dana and formerly at Bar Tartine</i>	6 Fried Cauliflower & Romanesco florets with a wedge of lemon	3.5 Tractor Organic Lemongrass lemongrass, lime, turmeric
	Tumami Burger 🌐🌐🌐 Savory and rich like a shawarma sandwich. A creamy Oyster Aioli with hints of smoke, Shitake Mushroom Sauce, pickles, onions and lettuce. <i>- Chef Yu, SF Chronicle 2017 Rising Star Chef, Top Chef 15</i>	6 Greek Salad heirloom tomatoes, organic serpent and english cucumbers, green bell pepper, red onion, feta & red wine vinaigrette	4 Tractor Organic Coconut Lime coconut, lime
	The Aficionado 🌐🌐🌐 Intensely mouthwatering featuring Charred Onion Jam, Sweet Baby Ray's BBQ Sauce, Yellow Mustard, Smoked Cheddar, pickles, onions, Chipotle Sea Salt, and Alderwood Smoked Salt. Seriously smoky. <i>- Designed at Creator</i>	6 Mixed Greens Salad with goat cheese and house vinaigrette	4 Samovar Iced Tea English Breakfast, black
dessert	celebrate		
Coletta Strawberry or Watermelon Sorbet 4.5	Fort Point KSA 6 Fort Point Villager IPA 6 Caposaldo Pinot Grigio 6 Raymond Reserve Chardonnay 10 Swanson Merlot 12 District 7 Pino Noir 7		
Coletta Gianduja or Horchata Gelato 4.5			
Fruit 1.5			

Allergy Notice: All of our burgers contain dairy (eggs, butter) and gluten. They also may contain oysters, ketchup, mustard, onions, and black pepper. If you have an allergy please let us know. We cannot currently accommodate substitutions.

The menu of burgers

AUTOMATION AND ALL BEEF PATTIES

After placing the order, you're set to wait the six or so minutes it takes for the robot to build your burger. By any account, this machine is beautiful. Smartly, the inventors of this robot hamburger machine chose to hide the process of forming ground beef into patties, and turning those patties into cooked burgers — that's because this entire process looks disgusting, whether a robot makes it or not. No one needs to see a vat of meat being chopped, processed, and cooked.



Other than that, the entire process is sealed behind glass, moved along by some of the greatest industrial automation technology I've ever seen. The buns are moved along a

pneumatic tube, where they're vibrated against a knife. The bun halves drop down a vertical toaster, where they land on a disposable, recyclable plate which was dispensed by a vacuum gripper. This plate moves along a conveyor belt where lettuce is shredded, pickles are chopped, tomatoes are applied, and cheese is melted. At the end of this assembly line, the cooked patty is placed on the rest of the sandwich, and it's delivered to the counter by a waiting worker. It takes six minutes to prepare one burger, and the machine can output one burger every thirty seconds or so.



From there, you just grab your burger and get a table. How are the burgers? They're okay. It's meat, cooked with fire, on a toasted bun, with toppings.

It's nothing really spectacular, The main selling point is of course the theater of watching two massive mechanical machines spit out cooked patties, slice tomatoes, cut pickles, dispense sauce, and sprinkle toppings onto a sandwich. They've got one machine on display in the front window, and another right next to where you wait for your burger. This is an experience, make no doubt about it.





MATH OF THE FUTURE

Here's where the robot burger joint goes off the rails. I can't figure out how this place makes money. Sure, a San Francisco-based startup flushing money down the toilet isn't anything new, but there has to be a plan to make money, right? There were two people taking orders, a doorman, someone cleaning up outside, someone cleaning up inside, and at least half a

dozen people working the machine. Most of them wore Apple Watches, which are part of the uniform, because this tells the employees what's wrong with the machine.



Creator's automated hamburger line. Patties are made and cooked in the refrigerator-sized unit to the left.

Source: [Creator](#)

Contrast this with a McDonald's, where you'll have only ten people working during the lunch rush. You'll have a kiosk, where you can order a burger with a touch screen, and the McDonald's makes money. Not much, mind you — the best, most available figures are that a McDonald's franchise doing two million in sales per year will net somewhere between one and two hundred thousand dollars.

Of course some issues will be worked out if this restaurant is ever scaled to more than one location (like not being able to order more than one burger per credit card transaction, likely costing Creator around \$0.80 in fees every time a ticket could have been combined but wasn't). I have no idea how much the Creator machines cost, but its complexity and the need for human operators to load, clean, and maintain all point to a high price tag. Unless they can get costs under control, they'll be spending more money than a McDonald's franchisee while taking in less money.

IS IT ABOUT THE ROBOT, OR ABOUT THE BURGER?

This isn't to say a robot restaurant can't be a destination attraction; there's [a robot bar in Vegas](#) that might just make money. That's foot traffic and novelty, though; there are only so many people working in San Francisco, and once the novelty wears off, it'll only be the convention center and Dreamforce bringing in the customers.

So, is the Creator burger worth it? Well, there are at least two Super Duper burger joints within a few blocks of Creator. There, you can get a burger, fries, and a beer for \$16. At Creator, the burger is six bucks, the fries are three, and the beer is six, a total of \$15. That's a whole dollar you're saving because of automation technology. This is weird, I don't know how this place can stay in business even if the robot is really, really cool. At least I ate there before they closed up shop.