

The beauty of the traveling burger

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I've become a stalker, plain and simple. I never thought it would happen (well, maybe if I had seen Johnny Depp in France when I visited the town that was the setting for the movie "Chocolat"), but I've spent the past two weeks following the OnlyBurger truck. If you have ever eaten one of their burgers, you understand. If not, I advise you to read on and do some stalking of your own.

I first heard about OnlyBurger from Seth Gross at Wine Authorities. I'd seen the truck at the Durham Farmers' Market, but even the wonderful smells coming from that direction didn't get me over there to check it out. Not until I was at the market helping Dave Artigues sell his Elodie Farms goat cheese did I become addicted. A Breakfast Burger, wrapped in aluminum foil, was delivered to Dave. He opened it up and gave me a bite. That's all it took. One bite.

I love burgers. For my birthday in July, I often just want a grilled burger with a nice juicy slice of vine-ripened tomato, lettuce, a little Dijon mustard, maybe a pickle or two, a little salt and pepper. Cheese, if I am in the mood.

There are several stories floating around about who invented the hamburger. All of the accounts I found take place in the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s. One fellow is said to have run out of sausages for customers at a county fair, using beef instead, naming his sandwich for Hamburg, New York, the location of the fair. Another story is told about a fellow in Wisconsin who made sandwiches out of meatballs so that his customers could eat while walking around. He supposedly named his sandwich a hamburger in honor of the German immigrants living nearby.

A third account gives credit to a man who ran a lunch wagon in Connecticut. He supposedly sold his sandwich to some rowdy sailors from Hamburg who named it after themselves. In yet another tale, a fellow from Texas sold hamburgers at his lunch counter and then brought them to the World's Fair in St. Louis. And last, but not least, according to the Oklahoma Governor's Proclamation of 1995, Oscar Weber Bilby was the first person to serve a hamburger, on July 4, no less, in the year of 1891 in Tulsa. He supposedly served it on his wife's homemade buns at a party on his farm.

Believe what you will, if you even care, but it does appear that the hamburger is truly an American invention and delicacy.

Still thinking about that one bite, I decided to write about OnlyBurger and accidentally found them one Friday at lunchtime in front of the Marriott in downtown Durham. I introduced myself to Brian Bottger, the VP of Munchies, as he calls himself, and told him about my plan to stalk him. He laughed, thank goodness, and began telling me about the history of OnlyBurger.

Tom Ferguson of Durham Catering started OnlyBurger with Sam Poley, chef at Restaurant Starlu. They spent most of their time on campus at Duke University. They closed down after a few months, until Brian convinced Tom to let him in as a partner. Brian had spent some time in California and had seen firsthand how well traveling food trucks or vans of this type do on construction sites. Tom is now known, according to their business card, as VP of Money.

Their beef comes from a ranch in Montana via Cliff's Meat Market in Carrboro. Brian and Tom are focused on quality and it shows. Brian takes orders. His two assistants cook the burgers on a grill inside the van, then assemble them. The veggie burger patties are Garden Burgers. Brian says he has experimented with making his own veggie burger but isn't satisfied with the results yet. I took my friend Yvonne, a vegetarian, with me one day so that she could give it a try. She hadn't heard of OB, so I initiated her when I discovered they would be close by, downtown in front of the Durham Performing Arts Center.

Brian read off the list of ingredients to us, an impressive mixture of grains, vegetables and spices. We got combos, which include fries and a Coke. The fries are thin-cut and well seasoned with salt and pepper. Yvonne enjoyed her veggie burger, stating she was sure she'd return with her husband.

I decided to head down to the Durham Farmers' Market one Saturday morning to get my very own Breakfast Burger. Business was brisk that morning. The crunch of what I initially thought was fried zucchini (it turned out to be a fried green tomato), the juicy burger cooked just right, melted pimento cheese and a fried egg, all sandwiched in between a crispy, butter-toasted bun was a breakfast like no other I had tasted before. I didn't give anyone else a bite of mine. Brian offered to let me sit at the Chef's Table, in the driver's seat, but I declined. I did not want to be guilty of accidentally releasing the parking brake and wrecking the business.

OnlyBurger's daily lunch and dinner locations can be found by going to their Web site, www.onlyburger.com. They also post their location on Facebook and they send out daily tweets.

Teresa Engebretsen writes a monthly food column for The Herald-Sun. Check out her food blog at <http://thesabbaticalchef.blogspot.com>.