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## OnlyBurger looks back on its first year



Chase Olvieri

As the posterchild of Durham's mobile food scene, the now-iconic food truck has, in little more than a year, inched its way into the hearts of Bull City foodies and changed the landscape around it.

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One man fiddled with a DukeCard machine outside of Wannamaker Quadrangle as a line formed that included students, 9-to-5-ers and DukeEngage Director Eric Mlyn. The other worker was busy flipping burgers. A timer went off every one to two minutes, but he approached his work with mechanical efficiency. There were veggie burgers, fries, cheese and beef. It didn't look like exquisite chef's work. But it sure tasted like it.

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This is the gastronomical anomaly that is OnlyBurger. As the posterchild of Durham's mobile food scene, the now-iconic food truck has, in little more than a year, inched its way into the hearts of Bull City foodies and changed the landscape around it.

It makes sense that OnlyBurger would be such a hit. After all, burgers and food-on-wheels are both old hat. Durham's taco trucks have long been perched along Hillsborough Road late at night. But OnlyBurger is the entrepreneur's mobile food outing, winning over diners through technology and smart business. The business opened—if one can say that about a truck—in September 2008, the same time mobile food was becoming a national phenomenon, making its way out of the big cities and into the smaller ones.

When OnlyBurger burst onto the scene, it was a joint venture between Durham Catering Co.'s Tom Ferguson and Sam Poley of the now-defunct Restaurant Starlu, and it initially focused its efforts on Duke. Brian Bottger, who has since stepped in to helm the company in Poley's stead, said the basic concept was to bring comfort food to people. He said it's the same principle that has allowed taco trucks to be so successful for so long, and the economic crisis has helped rather than hurt his business.

"It's gotten more popular as the economy has gotten worse and worse, and people's wallets have gotten smaller and smaller," he said.

OnlyBurger's rise coincided with that of Twitter. Though not new, the micro-blogging service saw a concurrent surge in users. Of course, OnlyBurger is not alone in using the Web site (see Los Angeles' Korean BBQ taco truck Kogi). Bottger said there is a group of clients to whom Twitter appeals and a group who it probably doesn't affect, but it hasn't hurt business. He said Twitter adds in the novelty of a "hunt," to the tune of almost 1,300 followers.

"It gives you something real to look at when you're looking at Twitter," he said. "It's one thing to find out what your neighbor is doing with his spare time. It's another to find out what the truck



is doing.”

But OnlyBurger’s first year was not easy. In fact, the business’s 12-month anniversary has an asterisk beside it due to the four-month period it was out of commission following an accident. In early December, the truck hit a light post on Towerview Drive when a car in front of it stopped short, damaging the front of the vehicle.

After nearly being put out of business by the high repair costs, Bottger stepped in—money in hand—while Poley focused his attention on other business ventures. Although the burger truck’s explosion came after the accident, Bottger said the incident is a reminder of the perils of mobile food.

“The risk of the truck breaking down or having another accident has not gone away. It is a danger,” he said. “If something happens to the vehicle, I’m out of business for a couple days. I try to keep the truck maintained as best I can.”

Following its return to the scene, OnlyBurger’s popularity skyrocketed. The truck began to explore Durham, making a name for itself and expanding beyond just burgers. Its menu has since grown to include both turkey and veggie burgers. Saturday and Sunday again, the mobile joint would park at the Durham Farmer’s Market and sell its breakfast burgers—egg, beef, tomato and, if requested, bacon.

And it wasn’t alone there, either. Foster Street has become a parade of mobile food joints with Daisy Cakes and a new juice truck. Tanya Catolos, the pastry chef at the Washington Duke Inn and co-owner of Daisy Cakes, has parked her Airstream trailer near the farmers’ market every Saturday since last July. She said people were immediately receptive to her business, and, in spite of the differences in the various mobile vendors, the greater visibility has likely opened up more minds to mobile food.

But OnlyBurger still seems to be the most visible player in the mobile scene. Bottger said business has doubled in the six months since the truck came back onto the streets. Although it still shares preparation space with Durham Catering Co., he said his business needs its own preparation facility. As such, Bottger is looking at a prep space that would also serve as a walk-up window.

“If I’m going to set up a kitchen, I might as well allow people to pick up burgers there as well,” he said.

If a second or third truck follows suit, don’t be surprised. But for now, Bottger, who has a long history in the restaurant industry, is pleased with the current state of things.

“It’s the most fun I’ve had in 20 years of the business,” he said.