

Back Yard Burgers makes its return to Gastonia

By Michael Banks

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Back Yard Burgers is back in Gastonia.

And this time, the eatery specializing in burgers cooked over an open flame is backed by an investment firm that includes a longtime professional football player, who already has an interest in the local restaurant business.

The new Back Yard Burgers on East Franklin Boulevard, which opens Monday, Sept. 21, marks not only the company's re-entry into the Charlotte metro market, but the Franklin Woods site is also serving as the prototype for how restaurants are designed and serve customers in this new era of Covid-19.

Muhsin Muhammad spent 14 seasons in the National Football League as a wide receiver, including 11 years with the Carolina Panthers. He has been a managing partner with Axum Capital Partners, a private-equity investment firm based in Charlotte, for the past 10 years.

“We’re excited about bringing in a concept that was very popular here at one time – back, new and improved,” Muhammad said. “We’re anxious for everyone to give us a try.”

Axum Capital Partners purchased a controlling stake in Back Yard Burgers in July 2017. The investment firm also owns a majority interest in another restaurant chain, Wild Wing Cafe, which has a location in Gastonia not far down East Franklin from the new Back Yard Burgers.

Muhammad said his company has faith in the Gastonia market.

“Overall, we think Gastonia has got good strong vitals as a sub-market and supportive market to Charlotte,” he said. “I think there are some good opportunities for some growth for our brands.”

A previous Back Yard Burgers restaurant was located at 2212 E. Franklin Blvd. and operated by a franchise owner. However, the restaurant closed in 2012. A Five Guys hamburger restaurant has operated out of the location since 2014.

The new Gastonia Back Yard Burgers is company owned. Of the 45 Back Yard Burgers across the country, 33 of them are corporate run with 12 franchised.

Currently, the nearest Back Yard Burgers are located in Raleigh and Knoxville, Tennessee. A second Charlotte-area location is currently under construction in Harrisburg with plans to open in February.

“We’ve got plans to grow Back Yard Burgers throughout the whole Charlotte region. Gastonia, it just so happened to have one of the first opportunities,” Muhammad said.

During its time here previously, Back Yard Burgers developed a fan base.



“When we acquired the brand, we were inundated with phone calls, emails asking us, ‘When are you going to bring Back Yard Burgers back to Charlotte,’” Muhammad said. “It’s always been a mission of ours to bring the new Back Yard Burger back to Charlotte. There may be some changes on the menu, but we told our Back Yard Burger community that we wanted to bring a new and improved Back Yard Burger back to this marketplace and give the customer something to love.”

Muhammad admits to being a fan of the strawberry milkshake and black bean burger.

Dennis Pfaff, CEO of Back Yard Burgers, said there have been some changes made to the menu. There are new burgers such as the Honey BBQ, Bacon Avocado and Mac N Cheese. New side

items include fried pickles, potato salad and mac n cheese. As far as desserts, there are now sundaes and the “brookie,” which is a fudge brownie on top of a cookie.

Pfaff says they have also made technological improvements to serve drive-thru customers faster. He said that is a must as they have seen their drive-thru business jump from 50 percent of all sales prior to Covid-19 to 85 percent currently.

When the restaurant opens Monday, its dining room will be open to customers with seating limited to 50 percent capacity.

Pfaff said Covid-19 is causing businesses to change their way of thinking.

“It is changing the way people are going to dine in the future,” he said.

Muhammad agreed.

“What we’ve learned is that people still want quality combined in a convenient platform,” he said. “We have a standard of quality when it comes to the food and menu and we wanted to continue with the convenience of the drive-thru environment. That formula’s been pretty successful.”

The Gastonia restaurant includes several new design features including an open kitchen where customers can see their food being prepared. Other features in the wake of Covid-19 are high-backed booths with glass separation and signs directing the flow of customers as part of one-way dining.



Starting in the second week, “touchless dining” will also be available. There will be a QR code at each table where guests will be able to order and pay for their food through the Back Yard Burgers website and have the food delivered to their table.

The restaurant is set up currently to handle about 36 diners inside and 24 in its outside seating area. There will be approximately 40 employees at the Gastonia site, Pfaff said.

Construction on the 3,300-square-foot restaurant began in July and wrapped up in less than three months.