

Dugg Burger Moves Ahead in Reverse

Dugg Burger, which opened in February 2015 in Dallas, is a different process, not just a new brand. Reversing the standard build of piling toppings on the burger patty, Dugg Burger digs out the crown of the bun and puts chosen toppings there. Meanwhile, the burger patty finishes grilling and is topped with choice of cheese before the parts come together. BurgerBusiness.com spoke with Scott Spence, who has held marketing roles at Church's Chicken, Taco Bell and Taco Bueno and is one of four restaurant-industry veterans (with Jeff Braunstein, Martin Hennessy and Jeremy Samson) who created the concept.

Dugg Burger sounds like it could have been one of those ideas born on a napkin at a bar where friends say, "Hey, you know what we could do..."

You know, that's not far from what happened. There are four of us and we were all corporate guys who can't help ourselves: We talk business all the time. We'd talk about what we'd do if we had our own place. We realized we had an idea of what we'd want to do. There came a time when two of us were in-between jobs and decided it was time to move on this idea we'd been doodling on.

It was time to give it a shot. It was an iterative process over lunches and drinks over the years.

Did people tell you your idea wouldn't fly or that the burger category is oversaturated?

We did hear some concerns that we might be coming into the category late. Some questioned our specializing in just one thing. But there are restaurants out there that do one thing well and have thrived.

And the burger category is by far the biggest, so we feel confident about specializing in a category this big.

Because you're different, how do you educate customers about the process? Is it signage?

We have little signage, actually. Our whole concept is built around simplicity. Our mantra is "Simple Done Exceptional." So we barely have a menu board. One of the four of us was in the restaurant at all times to help when it opened and now we're at the point where a lot of customers are repeat diners.

We've trained our team members to explain how the concept works and, really, once customers go through the line once, they've got it.

It's a build-it-as-you-go line like a Chipotle or Subway?

It is. A lot of people are calling themselves "the Chipotle of this or that" and we try to not do that, but our line works that way. You go down the line and the person behind the counter digs out the top of the bun and toasts it so it holds toppings nicely. The team member adds toppings to the bun. There are 13 toppings and they're all included in the price [\$7 for a burger; \$10 for a burger fries and soda, tea or sweet tea]: you've already paid. There's no nickel-and-dimeing you for mushrooms, bacon or cheese. While you're doing [the toppings], your burger's being grilled. It all comes together at the end, and it's hot and fresh and fast as can be.

What's the "Lucky 13" topping included on the menu?

Well, we have 12 toppings that are there every day. We call them the Dugg Dozen. We have one that rotates. That's Lucky 13. It changes every other day or so. The ideas are crowd sourced or come from our team members. We've only been open since February but we've probably had 30 or 40 Lucky 13 toppings. The idea is to be creative and to give the person who thought of it a little social-media credit.

My partner Jeff Braunstein keeps a list of who suggests which idea so that if theirs is chosen they can come in and get a Dugg hat or other merchandise. It's fun.

What goes into your Dugg Sauce?

We do that in-house. It starts with a Thousand Island base and we add roasted garlic, capers and shallots to give it extra flavor.

Did you consider having prepared signature burgers?

We did. There was a lot of discussion about that. When we opened we actually put some burgers together thinking people would want to build their own and others would want some direction. But it turned out that people were so into making their own that we pretty much walked away from signature burgers.



What's the "Lucky 13" topping included on the menu?

Well, we have 12 toppings that are there every day. We call them the Dugg Dozen. We have one that rotates. That's Lucky 13. It changes every other day or so. The ideas are crowd sourced or come from our team members. We've only been open since February but we've probably had 30 or 40 Lucky 13 toppings. The idea is to be creative and to give the person who thought of it a little social-media credit.

My partner Jeff Braunstein keeps a list of who suggests which idea so that if theirs is chosen they can come in and get a Dugg hat or other merchandise. It's fun.

What goes into your Dugg Sauce?

We do that in-house. It starts with a Thousand Island base and we add roasted garlic, capers and shallots to give it extra flavor.

Did you consider having prepared signature burgers?

We did. There was a lot of discussion about that. When we opened we actually put some burgers together thinking people would want to build their own and others would want some direction. But it turned out that people were so into making their own that we pretty much walked away from signature burgers.

You said you're dedicated to simplicity. Are you resisting the urge to add chicken burgers, or bison or whatever to expand appeal?

If we had commandments for this business, "Thou shalt not add new items" would be the first. Our whole concept is built on simplicity.

The real insight we had entering this category was no one was really delivering on speed. There are some great burgers out there. But you have to place your order before they start cooking your burger. With our having just one item, we pretty much know that customers are having a hamburger when they walk in the door. I can get it on the grill right away and we can get it all done maybe even before they have a chance to sit down.

If we were to complicate our operation with different proteins or whatever else, we couldn't deliver the speed. We know in this business you have to have a specialty and our focus lets us do what we do.

Is food brought to the table, fast-casual style?

We usually bring it to the table because we can and because we want to add that little bit of service. But often the burger is ready by the time a guest gets to the end of the line.

You have craft beers and wine, too, right?

We do. We do all local beer and usually have two breweries featured at any given time and we'll have six beers from light to moderately dark.

Are alcohol sales where you want them to be?

Our alcohol sales are a little south of 10% of total sales right now. I think we can do better than that. We've been working with the breweries to develop promotions for when it's their time to be featured in the restaurant. That helps.

You're all veterans of multi-unit chains. Are you already planning the second location?

Definitely. We started this to be multi-location and not to do a one-off concept. We're proving the business model with this first location and we're already in negotiations in Plano for our second one.

Are you looking franchising the concept?

Right now we want to be all company-owned for the foreseeable future. Franchising isn't part of the plan now but I wouldn't rule it out in the future.

You see room for another good player in the burger category?

Oh definitely. People love a good burger.

So what's on your Dugg Burger?

I usually get pepper-Jack cheese, lettuce, tomato, bacon and onion strings. Sort of a Western burger. It's good stuff.

