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Bay Area Burger Co. officially opened its S Broadway location to customers after a ribbon-cutting on Wednesday, Jan. 4.



Dream becomes reality for food truck owner Cole Ductan

BAY AREA BURGER CO. FINDS PERMANENT HOME ON SOUTH BROADWAY

By Janelle Fisher
City Pages Editor

A new restaurant has opened at 126 S Broadway in Green Bay, but the name and menu may be familiar to those who frequent Brown County's food truck scene.

Bay Area Burger Co. has officially moved into its first brick-and-mortar storefront and is ready to welcome diners.

For owner Cole Ductan, the opening of the restaurant represents the culmination of lifelong passion for cooking.

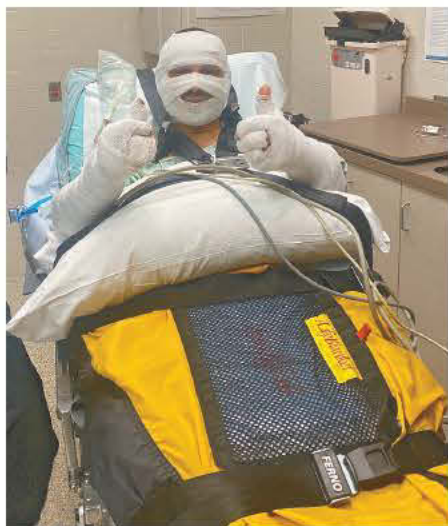
"I've known what I wanted to do since I was 13," he said. "When my mom was asking what I wanted for Christmas presents or birthday presents, I'd tell her things that I'd seen on infomercials — pots or pans or the Set It and Forget It. I've wanted to be a chef since before I could even think about working at a job."

After high school, Ductan said he got right to work making that dream a reality.

"I went right into culinary school in Minneapolis at Cordon Bleu," he said. "From there, I did my internship at Disney World for Epcot's Food and Wine Festival, where I got to work with chefs from all over the United States and Food Network chefs and chefs from out of the country which was really cool. I got a bunch of offers saying 'after you're done here, come on down and work for me here or there or wherever.'"

One of those offers was from Robert Irvine — whose show *Restaurant: Impossible* airs on the Food Network — and took him to South Carolina for several years.

After his time in South Carolina came



▲ Despite third-degree burns covering his face and arms, Bay Area Burger Co. Owner Cole Ductan was in good spirits and grateful to be alive following an explosion on his food truck's opening day. Submitted photos

to a close, Ductan said his career took him many places, but he ended up back in Green Bay.

"I moved back this way for a couple of years and worked at The Wellington for about two years until they closed down," he said. "Then I went back to Minneapolis, ran a couple kitchens in St. Paul and the Twin Cities, then back to South Carolina one more time. My mentor was actually opening two seafood restaurants. So I helped get that off the ground, then moved back here in 2019 where I took an executive position at the Green Bay Country Club."

It was at the Green Bay Country Club, Ductan said, that he was first introduced to the world of food trucks and got the inspiration to open Bay Area Burger Co.

"My wife and I were expecting our first baby at the end of August, 2020, and that also happened to be the Green Bay Country Club's 25th anniversary," he said. "So the country club was having a one-week celebration and I thought I'd try to make it really easy for my kitchen staff if I might not be there. One of the things we did was have a parking lot block part for the members... I brought in like eight food trucks to surround the perimeter."

After seeing how well food trucks could do in the area, Ductan said he acted quickly to get one of his own.

"I remember the next day I was paying the invoices to the food trucks and I was seeing the dollar amount that I was paying each of these trucks for two hours of work," he said. "I was doing the math and I thought, 'oh my god, I might want to look into this,' because they made some pretty good money. That was at the end of August, and by mid-September I had a food truck sitting in my driveway."

Ductan said deciding on the menu for Bay Area Burger Co. was easy.

"I already knew that I was going to do smashburgers," he said. "I first came across them five or six years ago in Minneapolis and over the years I've created it and tweaked it and kind of made it my own. It's something I've always brought around with me to my menus wherever I was a chef. Wherever I had control of the menu, I'd always add a smashburger so it was kind of a no-brainer what I was going to do with the food truck before the food truck even arrived."

While deciding on a menu might have been easy, Ductan said the early days of the food truck were not all smooth-sailing.

"On opening night, I was at a bar in Howard and started up my truck like usual," he said. "The flat top was heating up and I went to light the pilot on the fryer and it



wasn't lighting. I've been a chef for 15 years, so I know sometimes new equipment takes a little bit to purge the lines. So I was down low with the lighter trying to light this thing and letting the line purge and the next thing I know, this huge explosion knocks me back on the ground."

A leak in a connection, Ductan said, caused propane to escape until enough had accumulated to cause an explosion which left his arms and face covered in third-degree burns.

Ductan had to be airlifted to Columbia St. Mary's Hospital in Milwaukee to be treated, where he said the hospital staff was surprised by his demeanor following such an incident.

"They had me on a good amount of painkillers at that point, but the nurses were like, 'oh, you must still be in shock or something. Most people we see in your condition are not in this attitude or this mood,'" he said. "I was talking to them about cooking and how they prefer their steaks done and I was like, 'well no, I'm not still in shock. I could be dead right now if that propane would have gone down my throat and my throat had welled up or something or if the fire would have burnt my eyes or anything. I'm extremely happy and okay with this — I'm alive.' My son was two months old at the time. I had a lot to live for."

Just a month and a half later, though, Ductan said he was back in the truck and ready to reopen.

"I would be lying if I said every time I lit the pilot on the fryer my eye didn't twitch a

▲ The main item on Bay Area Burger Co.'s menu is the smashburger — something owner Cole Ductan said he's tried to add to the menu wherever he's worked since discovering smashburgers in Minneapolis a few years ago.

little bit," he said. "But I was back out there and hit the ground running."

While Bay Area Burger Co. was successful as a food truck, Ductan said it was always his plan to open a brick-and-mortar restaurant in the area.

"In August of 2020, I couldn't find a space that was available or at my price point, so I just decided to go down the food truck route to start with," he said. "It was always the plan to eventually get a brick-and-mortar storefront and here we are. It took me a year to do the buildout. If I would have had a general contractor it probably would have been done earlier this year, but I did everything inside here myself. 95% of this building I did with my own two hands — and I've been a chef for 15 years so it's a lot of YouTube."

Bay Area Burger Co. officially celebrated its grand opening on Wednesday, Jan. 4, at its new S Broadway location.

In addition to the smashburgers patrons of Bay Area Burger Co. have come to know and love, the restaurant will offer an expanded menu including shakes, malts, cheese curds and chicken tenders.

And for those who enjoy seeing the Bay Area Burger Co. food truck out and about, Ductan said the truck isn't going anywhere. In fact, Ductan hopes to be able to add a second truck to his fleet. **CP**