

NOW SERVING: Organic's the name of the game at O'Brothers

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The Big O' burger at O'Brothers is made with 100 percent organic ingredients, including cheese, bacon, avocado, tomato and onion. (Courtesy of Amy K. Fellows)



At first glance, O'Brothers looks like just another burger joint in downtown San Diego. The menu is simple ---- burgers, fries and salads ---- but the concept is one the restaurant business hadn't fully embraced before brothers Derek and Craig Cowling opened their eatery.

O'Brothers boasts a 100-percent organic model, featured in everything from the ingredients to the spices (even salt and pepper) to the supplies at the Horton Plaza restaurant.

"No one's doing what we're doing," Derek Cowling said. "No one has taken the whole organic model to the extent we're taking it. ... We're kind of raising the bar with the burger concept being all organic."

While some restaurants are getting into the trend by using as many organic ingredients as possible, O'Brothers slings its burgers and fries from a fully

certified organic kitchen.

The concept started in a backyard barbecue, as Craig ---- who was already eating organic foods as part of an effort to lose weight ---- threw on an apron and grilled up some organic burgers. As Derek saw people lining up for seconds and thirds, he thought of the possibilities for his brother's organic burger.

"Neither of us was doing anything (at the time)," Derek Cowling said. "I just told him, 'Let's do something with this.'"

After more than a year of research into organic products and additional time to prepare and decorate the space, the brothers opened their restaurant in late February. The menu is still changing, and right now it includes items such as The Big O' (burger with cheese, bacon, avocado, tomato and onion, ketchup and mustard; \$9.50), the Veggie Burger (grilled with avocado, onion and tomato, ketchup and mustard; \$4.75) and an organic Cobb salad (spring mix lettuce, cherry tomatoes, onion, bacon, avocado, feta cheese, chicken, ranch aioli and sea salt; \$9.25). O'Brothers also serves a selection of organic beers, wines, sodas and more. O'Brothers gets its meat from Homegrown Meats, a company owned by local businessman Matt Rimel that operates a large ranch on Palomar Mountain with grass-fed, hormone-free cattle.

Cowling said the ingredients led to a tasty burger that doesn't leave customers with the heavy feeling of a normal cheeseburger because of the organic products.

"We've had thousands of customers tell us that they don't feel that they've done something wrong after eating here," he said. "It's definitely the taste that brings people in, and what brings more and more people back is, it's organic."

In the kitchen, many of the sauces and dips are made in-house, including the balsamic dressing that comes on an organic side salad served with every burger, the ranch dressing that doubles as a dip for the garlic-parsley fries, and the secret sauce that's spread on their burger buns.

"Why shouldn't the customer expect the best ingredients? We think you're worth it," Cowling said.

And everything is made right in front of the customer in the restaurant's open kitchen. Even if there's some down time, Cowling said, cooks will be mixing up sauces or testing new items ---- for example, the restaurant is developing its own veggie patty.

"The show kitchen signifies something that's important ---- that's our transparency," he said. "That was more of a philosophy, showing how transparent O'Brothers is and will continue to be."

The Cowlings aren't stopping at their downtown location; they have plans to expand and are looking for venture capitalists to back them up.

"We have every intention of going across the nation," Derek Cowling said. "There's no reason why we can't be doing the same thing (as other burger joints)."

They also have plans to launch a grocery store line of their organic house-made sauces, including a red wine vinaigrette, ranch and hot sauce, as well as Craig Cowling's organic tortillas, which aren't used in the restaurant (but Cowling said an organic Mexican food restaurant may be in the future, as well.)

Derek Cowling said despite everything on their plates, his brother is still cooking for family and friends when he can.

"He'll never stop cooking for everyone," Derek said. "He loves to cook for people; he just loves it."

O'Brothers

Cuisine: Organic burgers and sides

Location: 188 Horton Plaza, San Diego (above Levi's store)

Owners: Derek and Craig Cowling

Chef: Matt Whipple

Signature dish: The Big O' burger (with cheese, bacon, avocado, tomato and onion, served with ketchup and mustard, and an organic salad)

Price range: Burgers, \$4.75-\$9.50; fries, \$2.75

Seating: 39

Hours: 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday-Saturday; 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday; happy hour from 3 p.m. to closing daily, with 20 percent off the entire menu, \$3 beers and \$5 wines; on Mondays from 5 to 9 p.m., the menu is half off

Info: 619-615-0909 or www.obrothersburgers.com; www.twitter.com/obrothers; Facebook: O'Brothers Burgers

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