**A Night at the Quick Grill**

Raegin Hoven slumped out of Rounders Bar on a warm Tuesday night. She didn’t bother to look before crossing the street– the bright lights streaming out of the cars on University Boulevard were warnings, not stop signs. To the drunk eye, her feet moved gracefully, performing a ballet between the yellow street lines. To the sober eye, she was just drunk.

Science has [shown](https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/am-i-drunk-hungry-or-both-alcohol-appetite-stimulant#:~:text=There%20is%20good%20evidence%20that,begun%20eating%20after%20drinking%20alcohol.) that drinking alcohol makes people hungrier, so she had to stop for a quick late-night snack. She could stumble down the street to Jimmy John’s, brazenly order a $12 Italian Hoagie and spend the next 15 minutes asking the woman calling out order numbers at the end of the line where her sandwich was.

If she looked fast enough, She may find Mr. Tee, a man in a Captain’s hat that [sells](https://tuscaloosathread.com/tuscaloosas-legendary-mr-tee-to-open-bbq-restaurant/) freshly-made barbecue sandwiches to students on the Strip. However, that involves concentration and quick decision-making– even a fully-sober person may miss Mr. Tee and his clear Sterilite box of barbecue sandwiches and hot dogs on their way home.

But, alas, right in front of Raegin was the Quick Grill. It’s an establishment one [reviewer](https://www.restaurantji.com/al/tuscaloosa/quick-grill-/comments/) regards as a continual right answer to the ending of a night out.

“Kicked out of Rounders?” He says. “Quick Grill. Not getting laid? Quick Grill. Struggling with credit card debt? Quick Grill.”

**THE HEART OF THE STRIP**

It’s easy to miss the Quick Grill in the cold light of day. Wedged between the CVS and the Publix, Quick Grill’s small, cream-colored brick square is more easily identified by what it’s next to than its actual address. One Yelp reviewer [described](https://www.yelp.com/biz/RwD-Tb9HeMpdTQZzBjSquw?hrid=sPAMOGa2cOVWktM0roTiKQ&rh_type=phrase&rh_ident=cheesy_fry) the location best: “right on ‘The Strip’ in Tuscaloosa - the strip of bars, restaurants and underage debauchery near The University of Alabama.”

The employees at the Quick Grill have a bit of a different definition: “We are the heart of the Strip, legends if you must say.”

The building is legendary. A faded “120” marking its official address. A dirt-streaked “No Loitering” sign lets both the Publix parking attendants and patrons know that this is a take-out only business. The patio is being redone, so it’s laced in a clear tarp.

Quick Grill thrives on two things: mystery and nostalgia. Besides food reviews, there’s almost no information on the restaurant out there. Google says the business opens at 6 P.M., but there are times when the lights are dim until 9:30 P.M. Most of what people know about the Quick Grill is from word of mouth or firsthand experience. Few people could say they’ve never seen the Quick Grill, and that’s something Ali, Ahmed and Wizzle, employees at the Quick Grill, are proud of.

“We’re proud to say we’ve been around longer than anyone else on the Strip, and we’re honored to be a part of most’s best college memories,” Ali says.

The outside of Quick Grill almost screams nostalgia. Upon first glance, the sides of the building look like they’ve been painted with gorgeous, meticulous graffiti– art that’s hard to forget. On the left side, there’s a faded cheeseburger and fries combo. The paint seems to drip off the sides of the walls, creating a pointillism-style piece of art, almost as if the dots were supposed to be missing. In a handwriting-style font, the grill features multiple labels: “Roll Tide,” “Messy Fries,” and “Falafel” are among the few. If you look closely, the red paint has been there so long that the red coloring reveals a grass green tracing underneath. During the day, employees Ali, Wizzle and Ahmed throw a theater-style red curtain across the service window.

A mere twelve hours later, the curtain rises and that grill and the tented gazebo next to it turn into Tuscaloosa’s very own circus. The most ordered item at the circus is also the establishment’s signature dish: Messy fries. They’re a heaping, striking hot pile of Yukon Gold french fries dusted in Old Bay Seasoning, smothered in a bean and beef chili and topped with shredded cheddar cheese. The dish is sometimes so hot that it melts the bottom of the Styrofoam box. The pros dunk the fries in ranch, creating a drunk man’s version of an artisan charcuterie board.

Visitors and Tuscaloosa residents alike rave about the dish online.

Brandon S. [says](https://www.restaurantji.com/al/tuscaloosa/quick-grill-/comments/): “Best place to late-night eat after a night on the strip. Cheap and quick as their name suggests. Don't purchase anything besides messy fries.”

Blake H. [says](https://www.restaurantji.com/al/tuscaloosa/quick-grill-/comments/) he “ate here like 3 times a week for four years. Don’t ever remember eating here but at least it is open late and is across the street from Egan’s.”

Blake and Brandon aren’t unique– Ahmed, Ali and Wizzle have served drunk patrons since 2006, and they’re quite aware of their demographics.

“Our target audience is the comers of the night,” Wizzle says. “That’s when things are pretty poppin’.”

He’s right– on a slow night, they’ll serve anywhere from 60 to 100 customers. But tonight is a Tuesday– one of the busiest nights of the week for Quick Grill. Tonight, Ali is prepared to swipe anywhere from 250 to 500 credit cards.

**THE WORLD’S SMALLEST, YET MOST ICONIC KITCHEN**

Prepping for a night serving the Blakes and Brandons of the world starts at hours before the late-night rush for the three men.

“We don’t get busy until 12 A.M.,” Wizzle said.

Almost as soon as the key hits the back door of the building, Ali turns on the grill and fryer. Fire codes only allow one of each. He likens the size of the kitchen to a walk-in closet.

“Honestly, we don’t even remember the exact size [of the restaurant],” Ali says.

With that in mind, the kitchen is modeled to have optimal storage. After all, three grown men, a grill and a fryer all have to fit in a room that could be likened to Rita Skeeter’s magical purse in the *Harry Potter* films– once you think nothing else could possibly fit in the space, there’s another cabinet. In between the cabinets, Ahmed starts filling small condiment containers with Quick Grill’s specialty ranch, a recipe they believe is the best.

“I think everyone can vouch that we have the best ranch,” Wizzle says.

Each corner of the kitchen reveals a different gift: On the right lay the seasoning shakers. The Old Bay is halfway full. Specks of seasoning stick to the toothpick-sized holes at the top from shaking it over hot fries. Salt is squashed right next to it, ready to be sprinkled over patties and potatoes alike, just as snow dusts the ground after a short snowfall. Falafel sits in the industrial refrigerator located toward the back of the building, desperately waiting for someone to order it. Unfortunately, it’ll wait for quite a while– falafel is the least ordered item on the five-item menu.

**THE THREE GUYS THAT MAKE IT HAPPEN**

In 1963’s *Wizard of Oz,* the Wizard famously says “pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.” In Quick Grill’s case, the men behind the curtain are hard to ignore.

Ahmed is 65. He’s got a somewhat serious look on his face. He’s not afraid to get his hands dirty while he preps food for the night. He wears a black hat and black shirt to prevent getting stains on his shirt. Every once in a while, he cracks a smile. Over the course of the night, he’ll wear many hats, both literally and figuratively. He’s what Wizzle calls the “OG” of Quick Grill. Every day he comes into work, ready to spend the night cooking, completing orders and ordering the food and supplies. He grew up in Yemen.

Next to him at the window is Ali. He’s the first face patrons see. He’s also the first person to tell the patrons that the menu is on the right side of the door. He swipes credit cards from behind a COVID protectant screen. Like the Waffle House across the street, the employees all wear multiple hats. Ali also cleans, cooks and prepares the food for the night. He was also born in Yemen but came to Alabama when he was older. After a long night at work, he goes home to his wife and children.

Wizzle works the other window. He’s 24. Wizzle only comes in on the busy nights, so most patrons who show up Thursday through Saturday recognize him. He’ll take orders and run them to the customers anxiously awaiting to receive their messy fries. As an added bonus, he’s the one who gets to shove the plastic fork on top of the Styrofoam container– the almost-instant way to tell the meal is from Quick Grill. During the day, he manages the day-to-day activities at a gas station. Wizzle’s from New York but was raised in North Carolina. His family is also from Yemen.

There are some things all of the men have in common. Not one of them looks unhappy to be there. Despite standing over a hot, charcoal grill, they flash a smile from time to time. This isn’t an unusual activity for them– Wizzle says the three men are their own family at work.

“We’re the three amigos of the Quick Grill,” he says as he laughs. “We work really great with each other– we love each other like family.”

The three men don’t just serve as their own family, Wizzle explains. He says they serve as the family for their patrons as well.

“Drunk kids? You just got to love them. They come to you like their second home,” Wizzle says.

Their connection to the community goes far beyond buying a burger or asking for a second cup of ranch– Ali’s been the superstar of multiple fan TikToks and Instagram stories, all highlighted on the business’ Instagram page. There are kids laying on the tables, counters, anywhere they can find, with a plastic fork in their hand and a smile on their face.

“We just love the smiles and the laughs we give them,” Wizzle says, flashing a smile of his own.

**KEEPING THE GRILL HOT**

Some things remain unchanged at the Quick Grill. The menu’s five core items– a cheeseburger, cheesy fries, messy fries, falafel and veggie burgers– have been on the menu since the business was bought in 2006. The awning covering the gazebo is rarely replaced– the last time it was renovated was 2020, after students at The University of Alabama stomped through its wiring during their National Championship street celebration.

However, just as fires burn out, the Quick Grill has seen its fair share of dim moments in the past few years. A 2020 [report](https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2006991117) by PNAS found that 43% of small businesses surveyed temporarily closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and Quick Grill was not special. Like many other restaurants, the Quick Grill closed.

Following the development of the COVID-19 vaccine and elimination of many COVID-19 policies, the men were ready to get back to supplying late-night customers with their dream meal: Messy fries. However, another problem was on the horizon: A supply chain crisis.

Historically, global supply chains have [relied](https://www.cfr.org/article/what-happened-supply-chains-2021) upon “just-in-time” models, meaning that they only make as many goods as needed at that moment. COVID-19 created a stall in consumer demands, thus causing companies to create less inventory and hire fewer workers. When the country began to reopen, however, consumer demand saw a great recovery, the Council of Foreign Relations [reported](https://www.cfr.org/article/what-happened-supply-chains-2021). Thus, supply chains had to readjust to a surge in demands for inventory and workers, creating [shortages](https://www.imperial.ac.uk/stories/global-supply-chain-crisis/#:~:text=Demand%20for%20certain%20goods%20was,were%20seen%20across%20the%20world.) in medical equipment, consumer electronics, cars and other goods. Among the affected goods were food packaging items.

For Ali, Wizzle, Ahmed and Abdul, this meant finding new ways to secure, arguably, their most important item: Styrofoam boxes. Prior to the pandemic, patrons would leave their empty boxes on the wooden picnic tables in the gazebo, forming what could only be described as the Appalachian Mountains of Styrofoam. White plastic forks would protrude from almost every area of the box– the opening of the front, the sides, the tops– linking hundreds of messy fry and cheesy fry containers together. Early in the mornings, the boxes may still be there, but by the afternoon, there would be almost no sign that the mountain range ever existed. Now, supply chain shortages might mean that customers can’t get a to-go container at all, let alone form the Styrofoam mountain ranges.

“Sometimes we don’t find the everyday supplies we need because wholesalers don’t have any to sell,” Wizzle says.

There are additional items the men struggle to find. Wizzle recalls when a 35-gallon jug of vegetable oil, used in the fryers, cost around $16. Now, it’ll cost him close to $50.

Not all the changes have been problematic, however. This past year, Quick Grill made an [Instagram page](https://instagram.com/bamaquickgrill?utm_medium=copy_link). Patrons can follow the account to see the menu, as well as enter giveaways for the business’ new merchandise. The page has 769 followers.

As for more changes, the business runs on simplicity. They’re not anticipating changing anything else in the future, at least for now.

“We don’t have any big plans really,” Ali says. “We’re running the show just fine as it is.”

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