

THE LEBANESE
BURGER MAFIA

مافيا البرجر اللبنانية

A DOCUMENTARY BY
OMAR MOUALLEM

LOGLINE

The meaty saga of a rogue fast-food chain with mysterious origins, a cult following, and a secret pathway to the immigrant dream.



1957

American entrepreneur Jack McDonnell and family open locations no. 1 and 2 in Calgary and Lethbridge, Alberta on November 1st.

1960

Over 30 Burger Baron franchises have opened in 8 Canadian provinces and U.S. states, and spawned several minor league sports teams.

1961

The Burger Baron Company Ltd. collapses under the weight of its rapid expansion. Its intellectual properties are effectively orphaned in bankruptcy.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

The Lebanese Burger Mafia captures the trials and tribulations of Arab immigrants by telling the story of Burger Baron, a rogue fast-food chain likened to the mob. To unearth the mysterious origins of the chain, writer/director Omar Mouallem—himself an heir to a Burger Baron throne—travels across rural Alberta where the institution persists despite the restaurant's many dysfunctions. He discovers how hundreds of immigrants like his parents spread their trade secrets to uplift their communities, while paradoxically fighting one another for ownership of a company none of them created.

VIDEO SURVEILLANCE



Two of the dozens of Lebanese war refugees who found a better life in a renegade burger chain.

1965

Lebanese immigrant Rudy Kemaldeen buys his first Burger Baron. One of the last original locations, the Edmonton restaurant flourishes. He starts building new locations and puts relatives in charge of them.

1975

Civil war in Lebanon forces thousands to flee to Canada for safety. In one year, Rudy helps bring over 30 close relatives and friends to Alberta, giving many jobs in his now 8 restaurants.



FULL SYNOPSIS

The Lebanese Burger Mafia captures the culture, influence, and aspirations of Lebanese-Canadian immigrants by telling the story of Burger Baron, a rogue fast-food chain likened to the mob. Writer/director Omar Mouallem—himself the son of Barons—drives across rural Alberta where the institution still exists despite the organization's many dysfunctions, to unearth its mysterious origins. After many twists and turns, he discovers how hundreds of immigrants like his parents spread their trade secrets to uplift their communities.

Envisioned by an entrepreneurial American named Jack McDonnell in 1957, Burger Baron was once Canada's fastest growing restaurant chain. But aggressive expansion and mismanagement sank the company as quickly as it rose. McDonnell returned to the United States, unaware that Rudy Kemaldeen, a shrewd Lebanese immigrant who'd bought one of the last locations in 1965, was rebuilding his empire, one friend or relative at a time.

Arriving on the heels of the Lebanese civil war, they trained with "Uncle Rudy," learned the recipes, then moved to a new town to start their own Burger Baron. Today, none pay franchise fees, and few agree on pricing, branding, or even menu items. Burger Baron is essentially a meme now, and the inconsistencies are part of the charm that's earned it a cult following.

For decades, Burger Baron has allowed families like Mouallem's to accomplish the immigrant dream in Canada, but will they survive rapidly changing dining trends without legitimate business leadership? And can the aging and ailing owners convince their Canadian-born children to take over their humble family diners?

Told with a mix of history, memoir, investigation, and animation, *The Lebanese Burger Mafia* is an endearing and lasting documentary about the immigrant dream.

CREW

Writer/Director/Producer - Omar Mouallem
(Digging In The Dirt, The Last Baron)

Producer - Dylan Rhys Howard
(Peak Oil, Boys Will Be...Themselves)

Executive Producer - Blake McWilliam
(Hands That Bind, The Time We Have Left)

Director of Photography - Moh Mahfouz
(The 50th, Nike: The Goddess of Victory)

Editor - Sarah Taylor
(Jesse Jams, FAST HORSE, PUSH)

Animator - Lee Nielson
(Baby Shark's Big Show!, Valley of the Lanterns)

Motion Graphics - Shadi Didi
(That's Wild, Scoob!, Maya and the Three)

Composer - Ashraf El-Assaly
(Things Arab Men Say)

DOP Moh Mahfouz and director Omar Mouallem work with a hand model to reproduce the Baron's infamous, secret mushroom burger sauce.



1983

After Jack McDonnell dies, his wife Rikie returns to Canada to run a Burger Baron in Regina, Saskatchewan. She operates it as a true family business with no connection to the Arab barons one province over.



Outside of Saskatchewan, the chain is dominated by a loose network of Lebanese families, including the filmmaker's. Thriving in small towns, locations are vastly different from one another, creating customer confusion and quality control issues.

1985

The Kemaldeans lead reunification efforts but fail over disagreements on recipes, suppliers and franchising fees.

Claiming to be the Burger Baron's elusive founder, Sal Kemalledine tried to fleece restaurant owners for "unpaid royalties" until Mouallem exposed him in 2013.



BASED ON A POPULAR ARTICLE



The Lebanese Burger Mafia is partially adapted from "Will the Real Burger Baron Please Stand Up?," Omar Mouallem's quirky 2013 investigation into the chain's mysterious origins, which went viral and won one of Alberta's top journalism awards. He's wrote a followup for VICE in 2021 during production of this film.

1989

Another summit organized without the Kemaldeen family makes more progress but is ultimately unsuccessful.

1998

Rikie McDonnell re-registers trademarks for her late husband's company, giving Kemaldeen Food Ent. exclusive rights to use in Alberta and BC.

2000's

Attempts to impose trademarks on existing restaurants are unsuccessful. The 40+ existing locations ignore legal threats while bootlegs like "Burger Barn" emerge.

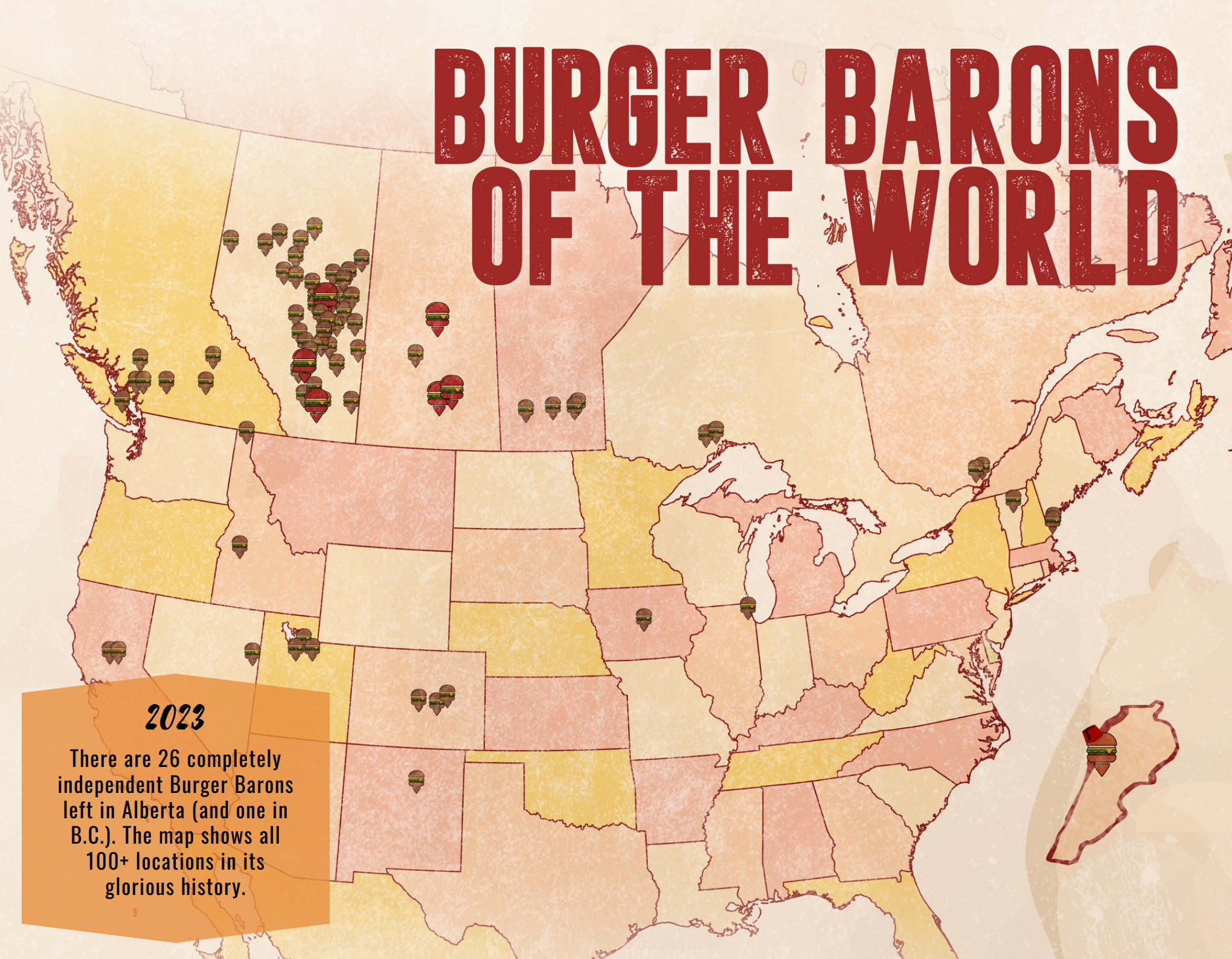
2010's

Challenged by evolving consumer tastes and their ambivalent successors, the Barons close up at a steady clip. The McDonnell and Kemaldeen families follow suit but retain the rights to brand I.P.

BURGER BARONS OF THE WORLD

2023

There are 26 completely independent Burger Barons left in Alberta (and one in B.C.). The map shows all 100+ locations in its glorious history.



A photograph of Omar Mouallem, a man with glasses and a beard, wearing a black and white striped t-shirt and blue jeans. He is sitting in a black chair, holding a yellow cup with a straw and a burger logo. He is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background shows a building with a red roof and a utility pole.

OMAR MOUALLEM / DIRECTOR

Omar Mouallem is a multimedia journalist known for intertwining human interest stories with world history and broader social issues. His first film **Digging in the Dirt**, codirected and coproduced with Dylan Rhys Howard, was a raw look at the psychological toll of oil sector work. Based on his award-winning reporting at BuzzFeed, it premiered on CBC Gem and was nominated for several Alberta TV & Film Awards, including Best Director and Production (Unscripted). His recent short film **The Last Baron** earned him recognition as a “producer to watch” from the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta Arts Awards and was hailed as “one of the best Canadian food documentaries” by enRoute magazine. Omar has also worked as a research consultant on several unscripted productions. In addition to teaching creative nonfiction in universities, he’s authored two bestselling books, including **Praying to the West: How Muslims Shaped the Americas**, which was named one of The Globe and Mail’s top 100 books of 2021.

A close-up portrait of a man with short, light-colored hair and a nose ring, wearing a dark button-down shirt. The background is a blurred, warm-toned interior with arched structures.

DYLAN RHYS HOWARD / PRODUCER

Dylan Rhys Howard is a filmmaker and producer with Back Road Productions. His work was described by the National Screen Institute as “fresh, nuanced storytelling and imagery that is evocative in its simplicity and intimacy.” In 2018, his short **Peak Oil** received an Alberta Motion Picture Industries Association award for Best Narrative Short and the A&E Short Filmmakers Award for Best Film at the National Screen Institute. His debut broadcast effort, **Digging In The Dirt**, a one-hour documentary about depression and suicide in Alberta’s oil and gas sector, codirected with Omar Mouallem, premiered on CBC Television and was featured in Hot Docs’ Spotlight Alberta series in 2021.



**BLAKE MCWILLIAM
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER**

Blake McWilliam is an award-winning Canadian director and producer. With an official selection at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival, a Canadian Screen Award Nomination in 2016, and multiple AMPA, CCMA, and JUNO nominations and awards along the way, Blake is quickly establishing himself at the forefront of the Canadian film industry. He recently completed production on the feature film **Hands that Bind**, starring Paul Sparks, Landon Liboiron, and two-time Oscar nominee Bruce Dern. He's next set to produce and direct a comedy series, **Timberwood**, and two feature films, **May Long** and **Salt Water**.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

My earliest memories have one setting in common: a Burger Baron restaurant. That's because my father owned a franchise in northern Alberta—though “franchise” is a loose term. It was, in fact, a bootleg version of the quirky fast-food brand envisioned in 1957 as the “McDonald's of the North,” before quickly going bankrupt. It was almost forgotten until a loose network of Lebanese immigrants, like my parents coopted it as a path to the immigrant dream. Only they never knew, or cared, about the Burger Baron as a corporate brand, treating it instead like a meme that could be modified at their whim. There are more than 25 completely independent Burger Barons with no two logos, menus or recipes the same. It's the anti-chain fast-food restaurant.

I always appreciated what this rogue restaurant meant for our family and hundreds of others in our community who left their homeland mired by civil war and social unrest in search of a better life.

But I often wondered, how did a cabal of unrelated Lebanese take it over, and who was the O.G. baron?

The question lingered at the back of my mind until my late 20s. I'd carved a niche for myself as a food and travel journalist, feeding audiences stories about celebrity chefs and the latest trend restaurant to open. Back in the mid-2010s, foodie culture was becoming the dominant creative industry in North America, but I was tired of chasing food trends at eateries that felt artificially designed for the Food Network. Where were the immigrant restaurateurs pouring their souls into humble dishes for the masses? Can they even survive these rapidly changing dining trends? These questions inspired me to make *The Lebanese Burger Mafia*.

At heart, it's about the migration of people and ideas, and the politics of food and proprietorship. Through a blend of verité film, interviews, animation, and archival photography



and videos, I wanted to guide viewers across western Canada, California, and Lebanon, revealing how folks like my parents discovered the immigrant dream in a humble burger shack. And I wanted to show how the fierce independence of Lebanese (well documented by sociologists) is responsible for the restaurant's triumphant resurrection and its floundering future.

To capture the humour, soul, and grime of the Burger Baron saga, I knew I'd have to take my crew on a trans-Alberta road trip to my roots in High Prairie, Alberta. But I also wanted to get personal, exposing the toll that owning a restaurant takes on families and the pressures of inheritance. The story builds toward an emotional heart-to-heart with my older brother about whether he chose his destiny to take over the family business.

Along the way, we stopped at more than a dozen other Burger Barons in

hopes of discovering the one true Baron, or Baroness, who made all of this possible for families like mine.

The Lebanese Burger Mafia is a celebration of Arab culture not just in story but craft: I deliberately worked with Arab artists like Ashraf Al-Assaly, whose jaunty Middle Eastern folk music makes each scene bounce joyfully, and the Mahfouz Brothers, whose stylish cinematography captures the Barons' bravado while juxtaposing this against a rural backdrop.

Ultimately, I wanted to leave audiences with a newfound appreciation of the overlooked cultural contributions of Arab and Middle Eastern immigrants, a common theme in my work as a multimedia journalist. By unfolding the history of Burger Baron, which is inexorably tied to the histories of both Lebanese and North American culture, I believe the movie can inspire greater empathy for racialized immigrants.



A photograph of two men in a kitchen setting, both wearing face masks. The man in the foreground, wearing a black mask and glasses, is adjusting a professional camera on a tripod. The camera is pointed at a plate of food on a table. The man in the background, wearing a red mask, is looking through the camera's viewfinder. The scene is brightly lit, and a potted plant is visible in the background.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Production Company: Back Road Productions

Duration: 103 minutes

Language: English

Subtitles: English, Arabic, French

Sound Mix: Dolby 5.1

Aspect Ratio: 1.78

Camera: Sony A7S III

Formats: h.264, prores422, DCP

REFERENCES

Amreeka (2009) | Jiro Dreams of Sushi (2011) | Parts Unknown (2013 – 2018) | Somm: Into the Bottle (2015) | Fyre (2018) | Donut King (2020) | Ugly Delicious (2019–2020) | Ramy (2019–) | Pepsi, Where's My Jet? (2022)



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Riad Kemaldean, aka "Uncle Rudy," aka "The Godfather of the Burger Baron," speaks with Mouallem, one of countless Baronets who descended from Kemaldean's legacy