

NATIONAL CULINARY REVIEW

MODERN BARBECUE AND GLOBAL SMOKE

Food Truck
Madness | Behind the
Front Lines



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THE ENDURING APPEAL OF FOOD TRUCKS

These restaurants on wheels offer remarkable opportunities for low-barrier entry and culinary innovation // By Jeffrey Spear



For the last couple of decades, food trucks have been finding their way into the culinary limelight. No longer “roach coaches” catering to an indifferent audience, they are bringing exciting new culinary experiences to the streets that are on par with brick-and-mortar restaurants. The trucks are operated by exceptionally

well-trained chefs, serving up pizzas, burgers and nostalgic favorites as well as flavor-forward ethnic foods and creatively inspired mashups. While the appeal is unmistakable, maintaining the trucks’ popularity and keeping them operational takes a tremendous amount of planning, time and resources.

A ROMANTIC NOTION

For chefs dreaming of opening their own restaurant, food trucks have been romanticized as a wonderful start-up opportunity, allowing the chefs to explore their ideas of culinary creativity with a significantly lower cost of entry than a

brick-and-mortar operation. In addition, chefs can manage their own time, experience greater mobility and enjoy more frequent contact with their patrons.

While these pleasures are considerable, there are several operational essentials such as licensing and seemingly endless inspections that can prove expensive, time-consuming and cumbersome. In addition, day-to-day responsibilities such as inventory, staffing, accounting, cleaning and daily truck maintenance can be daunting. For startups, these are issues that can take months to sort out.

According to **Chef Damian Del Pizzo**, owner of **Vucca Street Food**, a food truck serving Italian and Italian-American cuisine in Jacksonville, Fla., “Cooking is just a small part of what I have to do to keep everything operational. I’m the one that manages our bookings, handles the finances and makes sure everything is ready before we hit the road.” When asked about maintenance, he continues, “I’m a clean freak. I want our customers to see a spotless cooking setup when they look through the serving window. Plus, when the generator goes out, there’s a flat tire or the health inspectors show up, it all falls on me. The best part, however, is when 5 o’clock rolls around and I can start cooking.”

When that time strikes, Chef Del Pizzo blends Italian and Italian-American that reflect the foods he



Vucca Street Food (Jacksonville, Fla.) operated by Chef Damian Del Pizzo (top); Beets and burrata salad, a favorite from Vucca Street Food (bottom).



enjoyed in his hometown of Philadelphia. The “Oregon Avenue” hoagie (fried chicken cutlet, sharp American, prosciutto, long hot pepper, mayo, onion) is a customer favorite, as is the spicy rigatoni (alla vodka, fresh tomato, Calabrian chili, basil). “A lot of our customers are transplants from up north. They understand and appreciate what we’re offering,” he says.

SPREADING THE WORD

Food trucks continue to reign in popularity across parts of the country, with many becoming highly sought after as evidenced by enduring long lines. Achieving this level of recognition and patronage, however, takes time. For **Trent Jurgensen**, owner of **The Frying Dutchman**, a fish and chips truck operating in Tacoma, Wash., “We were losing money at first. We didn’t have anything set aside for marketing so our primary contact with the community was through social media. Over time, we managed to set up some roadside signs and used Facebook ads to boost awareness.”

When it came to increasing exposure, Jurgensen continues, “We participated in local picnics, special events and farmers markets and handed out samples to help overcome resistance. We finally knew we had a good thing when people told us they didn’t like fish and chips, but they liked ours. We started getting positive press, too. Being named the best fish and chip food truck in



Crowds line up for award-winning fish and chips from The Frying Dutchman in Tacoma, Wash. (left); Fish and chips from The Frying Dutchman, voted best of Pierce County (right).

Pierce County was a real boost. That’s certainly helped us stay in business.”

With prior experience managing a seafood restaurant, Jurgensen knows how important food integrity is to a successful operation and what it takes to maintain quality. That’s why he uses wild-caught Alaska cod and fresh, locally sourced produce. When it comes to cooking, Jurgensen says, “Anticipating the speed of the fryers and expediting the foods while maintaining quality is a valuable skill set. That’s why our fish and chips, shrimp basket, fish tacos and everything else on our menu is always made to order, consistently good and our patrons are so loyal.”

MORE THAN A CURBSIDE BUSINESS

Food trucks can be more than just a roadside attraction. Many owners, restaurants and foodservice companies design and maintain food trucks as mobile kitchens, used regularly to cater weddings and private parties, generating important income that supplements curbside earnings. In addition, catering gives chefs a broader opportunity to flex their culinary muscles and develop custom menus that are a bit more creative than their daily fare.

Alton Ankersen and **Cory Burke**, co-owners of the highly popular **Roti Rolls** in Charleston, S.C., serve an innovative



A happy crew at Roti Rolls (Charleston, S.C.) (top); A Roti Rolls special: jerk chicken with candy bacon and blue cheese crumbles (above); Operating the Coastal Burgers food truck adjacent to the USD dining hall alleviates pressure during peak service hours (right).

melding of Asian cuisines with a menu that goes beyond rotis to feature Buddha bowls (cilantro jerk rice bowls) with smoked hog, jerk chicken or curry vegetables. "We like spice, are heavily influenced by Indian, Vietnamese and Korean cuisines and enjoy bringing

something unique to the table," Ankersen says. "Our patrons appreciate the variety. They're not always sure about what we're serving, but they're happy to experiment."

Operationally speaking, Ankersen and Burke found it worthwhile to operate two trucks, one looking after their primary market in Charleston, while the other is designed specifically to accommodate more extensive menus presented at the many special events they attend. At music festivals such as Bonnaroo, which attracts sizable crowds, the co-owners use their truck plus multiple tents to ensure efficient service. When asked how they find sufficient staff,

Ankersen says, "Staffing can be trying at times. We have two full-time employees plus a great team of 30 to 40 previously trained part-timers who enjoy working with us, especially at the music festivals."

FOOD TRUCKS GET SCHOOLED

Many people don't realize that while there's significant demand and interest in food trucks in communities throughout the country, there's just as much enthusiasm among students on college and university campuses. As such, food trucks have become a portable extension of dining services, catering to the demand for convenient meals and snacks at sporting events and later into the evening and on weekends at locations closer to the dormitories when dining halls are closed.

At the **University of San Diego**, the school's food truck has been in operation since 2013. Over the years, the purpose of the truck has had to adjust, responding to changing culinary trends, student preferences and campus dynamics. Originally called Torero Tu Go, the food truck once served dishes such as nopales tacos that reflected the foodways of the indigenous Kumeyaay tribe. Needing an external kitchen to assist with dinner service and cater to events around campus, the food truck has been rebranded as Coastal Burgers and reconfigured to accommodate a simple, easy-to-manage burger menu consisting of hamburgers, cheeseburgers, a grilled cheese sandwich for vegetarians and a "Mean Bean" sandwich (made with a black bean patty) for vegans, available with fries if desired.

"We use the truck as we need it," says USD dining services director **Charles Ramos**. "We've found that every academic year provides an opportunity to introduce a new program,



improve service and reduce wait times. Plus, it's a whole lot easier to modify the truck than remodel an entire service unit."

While the truck still appears at sporting events and special events around campus, it is being used to reduce bottlenecks during dinner service. For this year, it has been reconfigured, serves a limited burger menu and operates alongside the dining hall's patio. Ramos adds, "Students like the experience of getting food from a truck, especially burgers. It's fun, adds a splash of color, brings vitality to the outdoor space and eliminates congestion in other serving areas."

Food trucks continue to intrigue, impress and delight diners looking for new mealtime experiences in a casual and entertaining setting. Whether the operator is an up-and-coming culinary star looking for a low-cost way to start a business, a chef seeking greater flexibility and control, or an educational institution looking to effectively cater to its student population, as long as the challenges are fully understood in



The Coastal Burgers food truck adds color and excitement to the University of San Diego campus.

equal measure to the joys of cooking, these mobile kitchens will enjoy enduring appeal.

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