FOOD TRUCKS

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The modern culture of the food truck in the United States is a rich one that focuses on providing specialty food in portable and more affordable locations than the traditional restaurant can offer. This culture is said to have derived from the chuck wagons of the 1860s that fed cowhands moving a herd cross-country and the night lunch wagons of New York City that served food to blue-collar night workers in the 1890s. Both represented the start of movable kitchens that offered affordable meals at a time or place where regular eating establishments were not available. Today, due in part to the recession of 2007-2009, chefs in cities across the country are branching out from restaurants and starting food truck businesses, finding much less overhead cost involved and more creative freedom available (such as featuring gourmet food, an ethnic specialty or locally sourced ingredients). This culture has grown to include food truck festivals (including the San Francisco Bay area's regularly occurring *Off the Grid* festivals), Twitter and Facebook pages dedicated to locations of popular food trucks, and even television shows based on the trend. It is important to note that while many books and publications use the terms *food truck* and *food cart* interchangeably, the focus of this entry is on food trucks. Food carts tend to be pushed by man power or hitched to a vehicle like a trailer, whereas food trucks are actual vehicles with mobile kitchens attached to them. This entry centers on the history, development, and notable subcultures in the world of food trucks.

The Evolution of the Food Truck

Food Trucks of Yesteryear

The first truck that cooked and served food came in 1866 with the invention of chuck wagons in the American West. After the Civil War, there was a large expansion of settlements towards the west in the country, which opened up a large market for beef in the southwest. Crews had to lead herds of cattle to market in the north and east, which meant living in the open for months. Chuck wagons were created as a place to cook and feed the cowhands on the trail, but they also handled medical matters, repairs, and entertainment. They were the life source for the cowhands and considered a symbol of ambitious spirit of the American frontier.

Towards the end of the 19th century, the Church Temperance Society opened night lunch wagons across New York City that became popular among the late night blue-collar working crowd. From 7:30 p.m. until 4:30 a.m. (restaurants at this time closed at 8 p.m.) these wagons would serve coffee, tea, milk, sandwiches and other quick foods for five cents each.

In 1917, the U.S. Army started utilizing food trucks called “mobile canteens” to help feed troops. These offered military men and women a food alternative to the base’s mess hall (cafeteria). The 1950s saw the creation of mobile ice cream trucks, which would drive around neighborhoods playing friendly music to entice kids to buy a frozen treat. Ice cream trucks still function across the United States today. In the 1960s, “roach coaches,” another form of mobile food trucks, started appearing on construction sites, offering a cheap, fast meal for workers whose work sites were often not near food options. Roach coaches still exist today, but in much smaller numbers.

By the mid-1970s, the highest concentration of Mexican immigrants in the United States existed in East Los Angeles in California. In 1974, Raul Martinez converted an old ice cream

truck into a taco truck (also known as a lonchera). Martinez parked his mobile taqueria outside of an East Los Angeles bar, and the idea grew from there. Today, there are over 3,000 taco trucks registered with the L.A. County Department of Health, and an estimated 4,000 unregistered taco trucks. The term *taco truck* does not limit food to tacos; these trucks can focus on regional Mexican specialties such as tamales, cemitas, sopes, and huaraches. One defining feature of taco trucks is that they tend to stay parked in the same spot all the time. When Los Angeles County passed an ordinance in 2008 stating that food trucks could not be parked in one spot for more than one hour, the Asociacion de Loncheros sought legal help and created a march to draw attention. A Los Angeles County Superior court judge found the ordinance to be unconstitutional just one day before it was to take effect.

The Modern Resurgence of Food Trucks

There are several factors that have influenced the resurgence of food trucks in the United States. First, as a consequence of the economic recession of 2007-2009, many restaurants closed their doors and many chefs were out of jobs. Additionally, the recession caused many construction businesses to close, which led to a surplus of idle food trucks. Chefs started buying these food trucks and opening their own mobile restaurants. The result has been a rise in the popularity of food trucks selling gourmet or fusion cuisine. The low overhead to get started (food trucks typically range from $20,000-$40,000, but can be as much as $100,000 in larger cities), combined with the freedom of being their own boss and the ability to go directly to the customers, has enticed many chefs to leave restaurant jobs for the more flexible world of food trucks. A recent trend in the modern food truck culture has been chefs who start out with a food truck, and thanks to their success, are later able to open a brick and mortar restaurant. But even then, the food trucks often stay in operation.

An interesting feature that many gourmet and fusion food trucks and some older styles, like loncheras, are adding is utilizing social media to help with advertising, daily locations, and specials. Restaurants also use social media, but the combination of rotating locations and daily specials mean food trucks have a lot of new information they need to get to their customers on a regular basis. Social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and blogs allow them to accomplish that as well as provide a way for customers to get instant feedback from the chef or owner of the food truck. Food trucks' popularity has grown so much that they are being featured in many other media outlets, such as popular restaurant reviewing guides like Zagat, and in television shows like Food Network's *The Great Food Truck Race* and Cooking Channel's *Eat Street*.

Different cities around the United States have developed a food truck culture unique to that area, often influenced by its history.

East Coast

The cousin of the food truck, the food cart, was popular in New York far before the food truck, and continues to influence the current food truck scene. By the 1860s in New York, the hot dog cart had become trendy. A 1965 law abolished U.S. immigration quotas, and as immigrants from various parts of the world made their way to New York, so did their traditional foods. Because a food cart was much easier for an immigrant, new to the country and language, to start up than a restaurant, many immigrants began selling the traditional foods of their homeland from food carts As a result, the current landscape of the New York City food truck scene is a mixture of different cultures providing traditional food for their communities, along with young chefs creating new concepts and using social media to get the word out. Because the city has a cap on food truck permits (2,800 for the city, plus another 50 per borough), food trucks with the permit can sell for as much as $80,000, whereas a food truck without a permit can sell for as low as

$30,000. It is not uncommon for families with permitted food carts to pass them down to family members.

A popular food truck in New York City that has also expanded to include a stationary shop is the Big Gay Ice Cream Truck. Started by Doug Quint, a bassoonist who was finishing up his doctorate in musical arts, the Big Gay Ice Cream Truck serves up twists on classic American flavors with names that are almost as fun to say as they are to eat. For example, the Bea Arthur is a vanilla ice cream cone drizzled with dulce de leche and crushed Nilla wafers, and the Gobbler is a vanilla ice cream sundae with pumpkin butter, crushed graham crackers, dried cranberries, and whipped cream. With add-ons like saba (thick, concentrated liquid similar to balsamic vinegar) and Sriracha hot sauce, this ice cream truck is unlike the traditional ice cream truck.

The food truck scene in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, features food at an affordable price, offering classic Philadelphia foods like scrapple and cheesesteaks and foods from the city's variousethnic communities, such as Greek, Italian, Chinese, Jamaican, African, Mexican, Indian, Korean and other Southeast Asian communities. Food trucks are slowly starting to feature younger chefs with new concept trucks, but the city is firmly rooted in affordable cuisine for their food trucks.

Washington, D.C., passed the country's first laws on mobile food vending in 1890, and up until 2005, was strictly a food cart city. After 2005, no more new food cart permits were allowed. Food truck permits are still available, but they have to follow an old law set for ice cream trucks, which says a truck cannot park unless people are lined up waiting for it. Some newer food trucks actually play with the rule, like Fojol Brothers of Merlindia, who have their customers waiting on street corner stops, spinning around. The first person to spin and be seen gets free food. Vendors are allowed to sell any kind of food, but most sell only chips, hot dogs,

and the half-smoke (a chili-topped hot dog similar to a polish sausage).

Midwest

Chicago is famous for having some of the strictest regulations for mobile food vending in the country, which has hindered the growth of the food truck community. For years, food trucks have been restricted from cooking on their vehicles, selling at night and parking within 200 feet of an establishment selling food. This means that vendors are required to make their food in a rented commercial kitchen, and keep the food under heat lamps on their vehicles to sell. In July 2012, the city passed an ordinance that allows vendors to sell between midnight and 2 a.m., created 20 set locations for food trucks to park for 2-hour increments and also allowed vendors to cook on their vehicles, but still not within 200 feet of any food-selling establishment, including convenience stores, gas stations, and grocery stores. It also requires each vehicle have a GPS system installed that can be monitored by the police at all times, and established the fine for selling too close to another food establishment at $2,000. Six months after the ordinance was passed, only one vendor had obtained a license to cook onboard. Two vendors, Schnitzel King and Cupcakes for Courage, have together filed a lawsuit against the city, arguing that the new and existing ordinances are unconstitutional because they give brick-and-mortar food businesses an unfair advantage **[please clarify: have these lawsuits been resolved? If so, what were the outcomes? If still pending, that should be explicit]**. It **[please clarify: one lawsuit by both vendors or two different lawsuits?]** also noted that the fine for parking near a restaurant is 10 times higher than the fine for parking in front of a fire hydrant, and the required GPS system is akin to a GPS-bracelet for a monitored criminal. As of November 2014, the lawsuit was still pending.

South

In Austin, Texas, the Live Music Capital of the World, with over 200 live music venues, food trucks are right at home. Many of the foods offered represent cultures that span the world—from Mexican tacos to Vietnamese bahn mi sandwiches to American barbecue. One popular truck is called Gourdough's, which features specialty donuts made from scratch by couple Ryan Palmer and Paula Samford. Some of their customer favorites include the Porkey, which has cream cheese, jalapeno jelly and Canadian bacon, and the Mother Clucker, a play on chicken and waffles with doughnuts taking the place of waffles, and honey butter instead of syrup.

New Orleans, Louisiana, turned out to be a perfect spot to set up a food truck business, especially after Hurricane Katrina. That is when Chef Nathaniel Zimet decided to open his own barbecue truck in the city. He ordered a bright purple food truck, rigged a refrigerator into a giant smoker, and started serving his own twist on American barbecue, which he called Que Crawl. One of his more popular dishes is the Que Crawl's boudin balls, which mixes Cajun dirty rice with smoked pork and duck liver.

West Coast and Pacific

Los Angeles's food truck scene is a mix of traditional Mexican taco trucks and gourmet and fusion food trucks such as Kogi BBQ (Korean bbq tacos), Nom Nom Truck (Vietnamese bahn mi sandwiches) and Cool Haus (ice cream sandwiches). **[please see note above: why are these considered "new concept" and not "traditional"?]** Kogi BBQ was created and is run by chef Roy Choi. Choi was working for a corporation when he was laid off in 2008. He decided to create a food truck that sold a fusion of Korean barbecue and Mexican tacos, becoming most famous for his Korean beef short rib taco and kimchi quesadillas. As he drove his truck around the city, he enlisted the help of social media like Twitter and Facebook to advertise and get the

word out about what he was serving and where the truck would be parked each day. The concept of Korean tacos **[please clarify: which idea? Korean fusion or using social media?]** was successful, and within a year, imitators started popping up in Los Angeles and in other major cities across the nation like New York City, Portland, and San Francisco. In 2009, *Newsweek* named Kogi BBQ "America's first viral eatery."

San Francisco's food truck culture is similar to that of Los Angeles, but it had to deal with more legal issues, as there are two different agencies that issue permits: the police department handles trucks on public property, and the Department of Public Health handles trucks selling on private property. This, combined with the San Francisco Bay area's high concentration of start-up companies, influenced the creation of food truck consulting companies, such as Tabe Trucks, created by Matt Cohen to help food trucks go from an idea to fruition, including help with obtaining the necessary permits. Cohen went on to create the San Francisco Cart Project, a website for the Bay Area's mobile food vendors, which includes a message board and a place to purchase permit documentation. Oakland's 2010 Eat Real Festival featured 90 different food trucks and carts, and saw almost 100,000 visitors.

Oahu, Hawaii's current food truck scene was inspired by two different kinds of food trucks. The first is known as a lunch wagon; these mobile canteens of the early 1900s used to feed the soldiers on the military bases across the island. These trucks typically serve food that is either inspired by Hawaii's traditional dishes, such as kahlua pork and poi, or by Hawaii's large Asian population, such as teriyaki beef and Korean-style short ribs. The other type of truck is known as a shrimp truck, and was created by shrimp farmers in the North Shore to sell their fresh shrimp to tourists. Many were created out of old hotel shuttle buses with makeshift kitchens. Most shrimp truck menus include a garlic butter shrimp and a spicy shrimp dish. Both lunch

wagons and shrimp trucks serve their food the same way: plate lunch style, which is one scoop of white rice and one scoop of macaroni salad topped with meat or shrimp.

Pacific Northwest

In Portland, Oregon, food carts and trucks tend to be grouped together to encourage foot traffic. The city encourages the use of pods, or privately owned parking lots where spots are rented out to different food carts and food trucks so that there are 10 to 15 together in one space. Some of these pods include amenities traditionally found in stationary restaurants, like restrooms and tables.

Seattle, Washington, used to be known for its many espresso carts, but in the late 1990s, tightened regulations resulted in many shutting down. The food truck scene is small, but still exists despite the difficult regulations.

International Food Trucks

Food trucks in the country of Australia often park at night to cater to individuals frequenting the bar and club scenes. A popular dish is a meat pie floater, which features a bowl of split pea soup with a meat pie floating on top, typically finished with some tomato sauce (a sweeter version of American ketchup). However, larger cities like Sydney feature more eclectic food, such as Asian fusion and vegetarian food trucks. In Belgium, potato chip trucks (French fries) have been running in the countryside for a long time. In the United Kingdom, food trucks are known as “snack vans,” and they can feature any type of food, from donuts and chili to ethnic cuisines. France saw its first American-style food trucks in 2012, and offerings such as tacos and burgers have been extremely popular at food trucks in the country. In late 2012, Singapore launched its first food truck, the Traveling C.O.W. (chef on wheels), which features gourmet

bistro fare with Asian influences, like mini crab cakes with wasabi mayo and Thai basil chicken in a bun.

Leena Trivedi-Grenier

See also Apps for Food; Artisanal Foods; Food Carts; Roadside Stands; Social Media and Food; Street Food.

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