

Mobile Goes Local

Food trucks, common sights in major metro areas, are now also serving smaller cities and delivering inspired, fresh dishes.

By Ivy Lamb

★ Ever since Los Angeles-based Kogi BBQ rolled out its first Korean taco truck, complete with spicy pork tacos and kimchi quesadillas, mobile cuisine has taken off — giving new meaning to ordering a meal “to go.” In 2010, the Food Network picked up on the hot new trend with a reality show called *The Great Food Truck Race*, and the U.S. Small Business Administration published tips on starting a food truck operation. But four years after Kogi’s debut, the novelty is getting a bit stale. Or is it?

“I don’t see this trend fading. I see it evolving,” says Heather Shouse, food writer and author of *Food Trucks: Dispatches and Recipes from the Best Kitchens on Wheels*. “Food trucks got started in big cities, but now they’re starting to spread, and other cities are catching the buzz.” Today, the food truck model has rolled into places like Austin, Minneapolis, and Kansas City. And while residents of New York and L.A. are already looking for the next big thing, the best food trucks are proving their enduring appeal.

For Carrie Summer and Lisa Carlson, operating a food truck is a way of life. The Minneapolis

chefs have run the Chef Shack for the past five years. Both women have more than 20 years of fine dining experience, but they left the restaurant world to get behind the wheel during the spring, summer, and fall, taking the winter off to travel.



Clockwise from top: The Chef Shack’s croque madame with salad; the Chef Shack menu and truck in Minneapolis; and the Los Angeles Kogi truck that started it all

PHOTOS (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) BY CARLA JANUSKA, HEATHER SHOUSE, AND JUAN CALDERON



Pico de Gap truck, New York City

“We were partly inspired to start a food truck because of our travel experiences,” Summer says. “We’ve traveled a lot in south Asia, where street food is everywhere and it’s so fresh and beautiful. We wanted to bring that to Minneapolis.”

Summer adds that they were both attracted to the creative freedom of running a food truck. Their eclectic, gourmet menu items include grass-fed bison burgers, heirloom tomato and

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watermelon gazpacho, and the ever-popular Indian-spiced organic mini-doughnuts, all made from local ingredients. The Chef Shack sets up at multiple Minneapolis farmers’ markets, and serves a diverse clientele.

“People should be able to find good food in a setting other than a high-end restaurant with fancy white linens,” Summer says. “They should be able to get it at an affordable price, and it should build community.”

Without the expense of leasing space, many trucks are able to serve up original dishes for ten dollars or less. Peter Reinhart, baking instructor and lecturer on food and culture at Johnson & Wales University, notes that food trucks enliven culinary offerings

because they’re an affordable alternative to opening a traditional restaurant. “Food trucks are a valuable incubator for new businesses,” Reinhart says.

“They’re not a new idea, but in many cities, like Portland and Austin, where this has caught on, it’s really changed the food scene, adding a lot of excitement and variety. I think the food truck will be very enduring.”

Chef Craig Barbour of Charlotte hopes the success of his truck, Roots, will help him open his own restaurant someday. “I wanted to be my own boss,” Barbour says. “I liked the security of working in a big kitchen, but I didn’t like the food I was working with.” Barbour sources his ingredients locally and his menu changes daily.



Treats Truck, NYC

PHOTOS (FROM TOP) BY RICHARD LEVINE/ALAMY AND JENNIFER STRADER/COURTESY OF URBAN OYSTER

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His dishes might include Southern-inspired offerings like the sliced heirloom tomato sandwich with black-pepper aioli, and the prosciutto and parmesan mac and cheese. Other days, you might find coconut-currried chicken sliders or roasted-pumpkin hummus on pita.

And while the food alone is often enticing enough, food trucks offer something most brick-and-mortar restaurants don't: a direct connection with the person preparing your meal. "These are small businesses, and most of the time the chef or owner is on board the truck," says Brian Hoffman, food writer and tour guide for Urban Oyster's New York City Food Cart Tour. "Customers get to interact with that person, and they can follow the truck on Twitter and interact with them there as well. A lot of customers feel connected to these businesses."

Barbour agrees. "Running a food truck is so personal," he says. "I'm cooking the food right from the farmers, and I know the name of the person I'm handing the food to." It's hard to match that kind of passion, commitment, and, of course, delicious and well-prepared good food. 🍴

Sniffing Out Food Trucks

Obviously, there's no street address, so how do you track down food trucks in your area or during your travels? A little legwork will pay off. Many cities host regular food truck roundups, like Food Truck Fridays in Phoenix and Chow Down Uptown in Charlotte, where vendors park



Food Truck Fridays in Phoenix



Roots's rillettes en croute

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together to form an outdoor food court. Some cities are friendlier to food trucks than others, but the following tips will help you find these mobile kitchens. Happy hunting!

Do Your Homework

Whether you're a local chowhound or a hungry traveler, a little online research is your best bet for finding these moving eateries. A quick Google search can turn up a wealth of information on the food truck scene in any city, including maps and reviews.

Get Social

If you don't have a Twitter account, consider signing up. Food trucks and social media go hand in hand, and many cities have combined Twitter

feeds with location updates from area trucks. Start following your favorites for regular news and location updates.

Go Mobile

There's no need for guesswork. Mobile apps like Roaming Hunger (roaminghunger.com) cover multiple cities, while others like New York's Tweet.it (tweet.it), and Food Truck Fiesta in Washington, D.C., (foodtruckfiesta.com) focus on a specific area. Most of these apps collect Twitter updates to plot truck locations on a map with links to menus and reviews. No single app is totally comprehensive, so mix and match depending on your location to get the best results.

