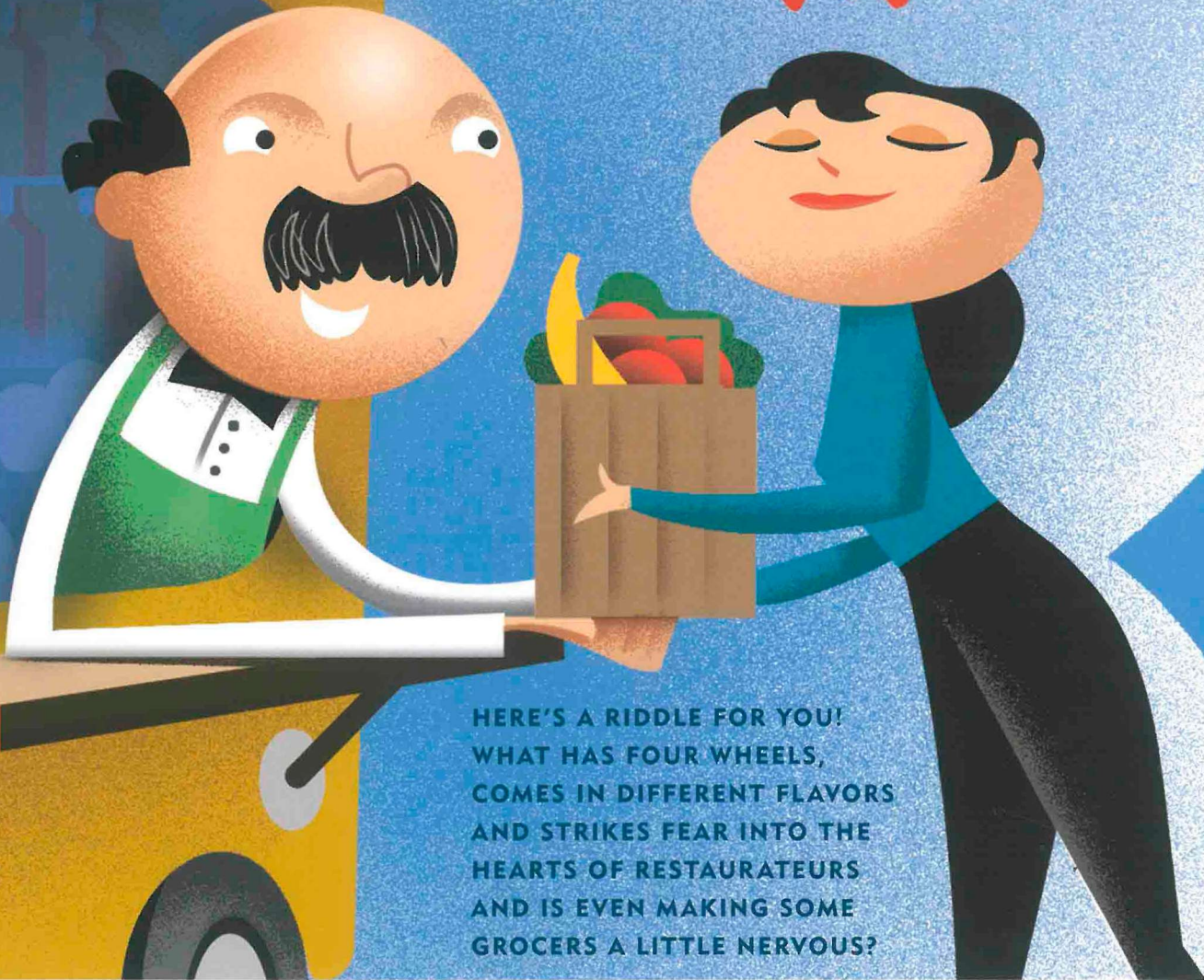


DRIVING THE DINING TREND



**HERE'S A RIDDLE FOR YOU!
WHAT HAS FOUR WHEELS,
COMES IN DIFFERENT FLAVORS
AND STRIKES FEAR INTO THE
HEARTS OF RESTAURATEURS
AND IS EVEN MAKING SOME
GROCERS A LITTLE NERVOUS?**

The answer — food trucks. Or, at least the latest iteration of them that are becoming increasingly popular in urban and suburban locales for their upscale and modern take on a wide variety of ethnic cuisines and low prices, enabling them to bridge the gap between retail and restaurants.

“They’ve had a huge impact on the culinary scene,” said Scott Allmendinger, director of consulting for the Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park, NY. “They’re part of the extreme casualization of foodservice, an economy where people want an authentic experience at the lowest possible price, and

a sense of adventure. So the trucks have tapped into a kind of perfect storm.”

Basically this is an industry that’s come a long way from the roadside “roach coaches,” dirty water hot dogs and mystery meat sandwiches.

Allmendinger and other industry observers agree that the new generation of trucks are preparing some of the most creative and freshest fare in foodservice and supplanting some fast feeders as a top meal choice.

And California has emerged as the epicenter of this movement which has attracted chefs from all over the world and is seen as a viable business alternative



to brick and mortar restaurants as real estate costs continue to escalate.

Mobile dining is not really a new phenomenon. The earliest record of them in the U.S. was the horse-drawn tamale carriages of the late 1800s. They are also considered an outgrowth of the farmers markets that began springing up in the late 1970s and the loncheras that have been a common sight in Mexican-American neighborhoods for decades.

These kitchens on wheels, often owned by people with culinary backgrounds, have also moved outside traditional venues like construction sites onto city and suburban streets.

But they have really come into their own in the last few years as the center of culinary creativity, attracting hordes of multi-generational customers — particularly millennials. In effect, street food has democratized ethnic cuisine — becoming part of the cultural fabric of the U.S. and it is changing how and what people eat.

Street food and trucks have inspired street food festivals across the country, cooking competitions and reality television shows, and its fans include such celebrity chefs as Martha Stewart, Anthony Bourdain, Marcus Samuelsson and TV's Top Chef host Tom

Colicchio who has rolled out Wichcraft Sandwich carts in San Francisco and Las Vegas.

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This mobility is one of the reasons for the concept's success. But it has also made food trucks victims of their own success in counties and municipalities with outdated health regulations or laws designed to protect restaurant operators.

“Los Angeles County has 88 different cities and there was a lot of confusion over regulations from city-to-city,” said Matt Geller, ceo, Southern California Mobile Food Vendors Association. “When I first met with food truck operators, they all told me terrible stories about trying to be a small business and being smacked down by various regulatory bodies. That’s when we started the association.”

Today, the National Restaurant Association calls food trucks one of the fast-growing segments in foodservice and estimated that sales for 2014 were about \$700 million or one percent of all restaurant sales.

This may be an understatement, according to IBISWorld research which found that street food is already a \$1 billion industry. Some sources estimate that sales could increase to \$2.7 billion over the next several of years.

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The food truck phenomenon was also the subject of a joint study by the University of Michigan and Northwestern University, which found that there are more than 4,000 food trucks in cities with populations of 100,000 or more.

Since virtually all of these trucks have an online presence, the survey was based on Twitter feeds.

In a breakdown by city in California, it was found that 366 food trucks are now operating in Los Angeles; Irvine, 93; San Jose, 93; Fullerton, 90; Santa Ana, 90; Huntington Beach, 89; Oakland, 86; Fremont, 77; Berkeley, 74; Santa Clara, 74; Concord, 73; Hayward, 73; Sunnyvale, 73; Richmond, 71; Santa Rosa, 69; Fairfield, 67; Daly City, 66; San Diego, 66; Vallejo, 66; Long Beach, 31; Sacramento, 21; and Burbank, 8.

The growth of food trucks is what researchers see as a prime example of “the new authenticity economy” — a trend that favors unique, eclectic, local and artisanal products and has turned downtown L.A. into a Mecca for foodies.

“What we’re seeing is a confluence of exciting global cuisines,” said Allmendinger. “It’s what some call smash cuisine or fusion. I call it adventure-gourmet-casual. It started to get popular in L.A. with chef Roy Choi’s Kogi barbecue taco trucks that fuse Korean and Latin cuisine.”

The operation has been so successful that it is expanding into sit-down restaurants and has inspired legions of other food truck operators serving

everything from Vietnamese sandwiches and Brazilian barbecue to cupcakes.

Another high flyer in this segment is The Grilled Cheese Truck which offers everything from the traditional to specialties like goat cheese and brie melts with additions like applewood bacon or smoked turkey, to sweet dessert melts containing Nutella or candied walnuts. The truck’s website has a monthly calendar showing events and locations.

Kogi and other upscale food trucks are actually creating meals for non-traditional day parts.

“It’s about in-between meals — grab-and-go fuel, not your traditional lunch or dinner portion size and tends to be intense in flavor,” Allmendinger said.

Food trucks are riding the crest of this wave, he adds, but some brick and mortar establishments, seeing their success are also trying to tap into the non-traditional meal segment.

The so called legacy brands, or the restaurant chains, are trying to capitalize on the trend and companies like Taco Bell and Pizza Hut have rolled out their own trucks. But it remains the purview of independent entrepreneurs with a dedication to quality and a mission to serve local, sustainable and authentic foods.

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“The brands are trying to figure out how to capitalize on it,” he said. “They will fail if they just package the usual brick and mortar brands into something mobile. It’s not just about mobility, it’s about authenticity.”

The next iteration now emerging is food bikes, according to Allmendinger.

“They are even more mobile and lower priced than the trucks,” he said. “They’ll be able to penetrate some of the more densely populated urban areas that don’t have the parking to support a bigger vehicle.”

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Meanwhile, the popularity of the trucks is helping change some of the onerous regulations that held back their growth in the past.

The first is the so-called “100-foot rule” which prevented food trucks from parking within 100 feet of a restaurant. Los Angeles stopped enforcing it in 1979 when a court ruled that it was restraint of trade and, therefore, unconstitutional. However, it wasn’t pulled off the books until 2002, Geller said.

Santa Monica had been enforcing a time limit regulation disguised as a public safety issue.

“Santa Monica gave one of our members a ticket and we challenged it,” he said. “Then Glendale, Monrovia and Burbank passed similar legislation. They really weren’t in the interest of public safety. They were clearly restaurant protectionist laws. We sued them and 12 other cities. That got their attention.”

Geller said there hasn’t been a lawsuit in a long time.

“Rather we’re focusing on helping cities come up with reasonable regulations that protect public safety and health while giving consumers great choices,” he said. “We’re food truck advocates first, but being a consumer advocate is running a close second.

The association’s lobbying efforts to push back on government over-reach have been very effective. “I think we changed the laws in 28 cities and helped to open up Riverside, San Bernardino and L.A. counties to food trucks,” he said.

At the same time, municipalities are starting to roll out grading systems for food trucks.

“The government can make huge strides in fixing the perception of food trucks as roach coaches,” Geller said. “California launched the grading ordinance for restaurants in 1997 and rolled it out for food trucks in 2011. We are very much in favor of it. People saw the trucks with a big blue “A” — the same one they’d seen on restaurants.

He said the grading ordinance alleviated consumer concerns about health of the food prepared in the vehicle. And when it was rolled out in L.A. a larger percentage of food trucks got the “A” rating than restaurants,” said Geller. ■

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