

THIS PHOTO Food trucks outside Angel City Brewery in the Arts District.



KEEP ON T

TRUCKING

by ELYSE GLICKMAN



«AFTER MANY YEARS of buzz-wordy food trends, a celebrity chef explosion and flashy high-concept restaurants, Los Angeles restaurant goers wanted a new dining experience to chase after... and they got their wish in 2008. That year, pioneering “trucker” and culinary wunderkind Roy Choi made a splash with his Korean-Mexican hybrid tacos — so much so that a Kogi pop-up made a brief appearance in



Los Angeles

WHERE ON EARTH

THIS PHOTO Kogi truck anime.



LAX's Terminal 4 in 2015. In short order, the trucks and their delicious cargo — thanks to the rising influence of social media and a promising app called “Twitter” a decade before influencers roamed the Earth — attracted the kinds of lines associated with major rock festivals and Broadway shows.»

«Mobile restaurants, however, were hardly new. A fleet of neighbourhood taco trucks had served work sites and working class L.A. residential areas for years. Some of those trucks cultivated a loyal following of Mexican food enthusiasts who searched high and low for Mexican food true to its origins. As “authentic” and “traditional” became buzzwords in the food media, the trucks’ popularity lay in their “best kept secret” status. It was all about word of mouth... especially if the food tasted better than similar fare high-end restaurants were offering.

“Food trucks have been part of the landscape of L.A. and other cities, but until about 2008 they had a very specific place in the city’s history,” says Michele Grant, one of the original founders of The Grilled Cheese Truck and a first-hand witness to the birth and growth of the phenomenon.

“Known as *carros loncheros*, they mostly catered to workers and sold Mexican and Latin American food, travelling to different work and construction sites,” Grant continues. “An attorney friend of mine, Erin Glenn, represented them as a leader of the Asociación de Loncheros L.A. Familia Unida de California. She fought for the city’s catering and food truck operators, who were dealing with a confusing myriad of licensing and zoning regulations and the police giving them a hard time.”

Grant notes it is ironic that while the food truck universe today embodies Los Angeles’ embrace of multiculturalism, opposition to the food truck in the early years related to

stigma tied to anti-immigrant sentiment and socioeconomic stereotypes. Even with Kogi’s popularity growing, trucks were being chased away by police. Social media and the young savvy people using it proved to be the movement’s salvation. It also did not hurt that Kogi’s founders had a distinctive logo and bright colours on the trucks that made them easily identifiable and smart phone camera-ready.

It wasn’t long before all kinds of food purveyors jumped on the bandwagon, from established chefs and restauranteurs to “Top Chef” contestants and decades-old mom-and-pop restaurants representing every kind of ethnic cuisine found in L.A. In addition to popular standbys like tacos, burgers and hot dogs, hungry food hunters could mix things up with a variety of playfully painted and logoed trucks offering both traditional and reinvented versions of bites from around the globe, including Vietnamese *banh mi*, Japanese ramen, Indian *dosas*, German *currywurst*, Salvadoran *pupusas*, pasta of every description, regular and dairy-free exotic ice creams, gourmet donuts, Southern barbecue and, of course, the tacos and burritos loved by generations of Angelinos.

“Kogi set the benchmark for everybody who came after them, in terms of graphic wraps that helped set one truck apart from the other, making them recognizable enough to develop a following,” Grant says. “By the time my former partner and I started The Grilled Cheese Truck in 2009, there were already 28 different trucks on the road. Several»




THIS PHOTO
Farmers'
Market diners.
PHOTO OPPOSITE
Farmers'
Market
entrance sign.



Still (Farm) Fresh After All These Years

As the ORIGINAL FARMERS' MARKET in Hollywood has served the community and visitors since 1934, some argue it was the forerunner to today's rolling restaurants. While it has evolved through the decades to suit the broadening palates of Angelinos, its businesses are exceptionally well prepared to adapt to socially safe dining as it has long been a hub for al fresco dining and take-out.

Breakfast institution Du-par's Restaurant and Bakery, for example, recently reinstated its classic carhop service. Customers order by phone in the Farmers' Market parking lot and provide the make and model of their car for Du-par's employees to personally deliver the food. Kaylin & Hobbs, a New York-style pickle purveyor with flavours like spicy dill, full sour, mustard, and jalapeno that opened right before the pandemic, found creative ways to reach customers teaming up with market stalwart Magee's Kitchen and staging "pickle pop-ups" in the Market Plaza near the parking lot to get more eyes on their product.

Other beloved shops and restaurants still feeding shoppers' curiosity or sense of nostalgia at press time include include T&Y Bakery, The Gumbo Pot, Pampas Grill, Nonna's Empanadas, Patsy's Pizza, Fritz Coop (steered by top L.A. chef Neal Fraser), a branch of Trejo's Tacos, Singapore's Banana Leaf and China Depot. Market Tavern, which boldly opened in 2020 even with covid-19 precautions in place, is stirring up excitement by fusing traditional British pub recipes with California ingredients. One can enjoy the signature Fish 'n Chips, savoury hand pies, bangers and mash and drunken short ribs on the patio with a view of a television projecting both major American team sports tournaments and Premier League soccer. 



THIS PHOTO Miracle Mile food trucks.
PHOTOS OPPOSITE FROM TOP Mariscos Jalisco;
 Pasta Sisters staff; Patsy D'Amores
 pizza; Fritzi Coop sandwich.

LOS ANGELES TOURISM

«of them with flexible business models to fall in line with the changes (including those brought about by covid-19), are still thriving today.”

Grant (who worked on film productions, and later became a freelance private chef serving clients with special dietary needs) and her partner determined that a grilled cheese truck made sense since no other trucks they knew about offered it. Furthermore, it was something that could easily be adapted for vegetarian customers. The enterprise came together in a six-week whirlwind. On the eve of their opening in October 2009, they were registering the truck, creating the logo and setting up accounts and presences on Twitter and Facebook. They also had to work out the menu, which needed healthy options so Grant could hold up her reputation as a “healthy

chef” and offer vegetarian sandwiches that omnivores would also want to eat.

Six weeks after Grant’s partner tweeted, “The Grilled Cheese Truck is coming,” the lines formed.

“On the first night, we had over 300 people standing in line waiting for sandwiches,” Grant recalls. “And, of course, something will go wrong on the first night, and for us, it was our griddle not working. However, we got it repaired and everything worked out... and we just kept going. By that time, we had 2,700 people following us on Twitter and 1,000 people following us on Facebook. Without formal advertising or PR agency involvement, we landed print media coverage and television appearances on the Food Network, Cooking Channel and Travel Channel. We were a true destination for»



Cook



SERVES 4

Tuna Sambal

A RECIPE FROM SINGAPORE'S *Banana Leaf* at the Original Farmers' Market, Hollywood.

Vegetable Oil ½ cup

White Onion

1 large, chopped

Garlic 4 cloves, minced

Fresh Ginger 1 Tbs, peeled and minced

Tomato Paste 5 Tbs

Red Bell Pepper 1, seeded and thinly sliced

Ground Turmeric ½ tsp

Ground Cumin ½ tsp

Sambal Oelek Chile Paste 1 Tbs or **Fresh Green Chile** 1, sliced

Sea Salt a pinch

Ground White Pepper a pinch

Solid White Tuna 3 x 6 oz cans

Fresh Cilantro ½ cup, coarsely chopped

Water ½ cup, if needed

- 1 PLACE** a large skillet coated with oil on the stove over medium heat.
- 2 WHEN** the oil gets hazy, add the onion, garlic and ginger. Stir and cook until the vegetables are tender but not browned, about five minutes.
- 3 ADD** the tomato paste, bell pepper, turmeric, cumin and chile paste and season to taste with salt and pepper. Cook and stir for another five minutes, or until the tomato paste is well incorporated.
- 4 ADD** the tuna, stirring to break it up into smaller pieces and flakes and combine.
- 5 ADD** the water if the sambal mixture looks too dry, and cook for another three minutes to heat through.
- 6 DIVIDE** into four portions and sprinkle each serving with cilantro and serve with a few ounces of cooked white rice.

«locals and visitors to Los Angeles who searched us out. Even though some argued it was crazy to wait 45 minutes for a sandwich, meeting new people while waiting in line was part of the fun. There was a couple who met in line, and others who came down from San Jose, San Francisco and the rest of the country to see us.»

Strategies leading to The Grilled Cheese Truck's early success included pairing up with a dessert-focused truck, and participating in larger events where people in a group would split up and wait in different lines to make their wait go a little faster. Through the course of the next decade, food trucks became an integral part of L.A. destination events such as art gallery open houses, outdoor film screenings and music festivals. The vibrant trucks also helped democratize high-end food and wine festivals, and later, paved the way for festivals and events dedicated to the food truck. These include the 626 Night Market (a rollicking mash-up of big city night markets like those taking place across Asia) and the Vegan Street Fair in North Hollywood. Local craft breweries and bars still regularly team up with the trucks to provide sustenance for their customers.

Chris Urakami, founder of the Poutine Brothers truck with brother Matt, points out that in contrast to many popular trucks offering fusion fare or the familiar tacos, dogs and burgers, they offered a niche dish that provided curious locals a fun comfort food alternative and Canadian L.A. residents a taste of home.

"There isn't very much poutine to be had out here," quips Chris, who had two trucks circulating around L.A. and Orange County by the end of 2018. "When we saw poutine on restaurant menus, it was usually a one-off special or a fancy variation with all kinds of specialty ingredients but not the gravy, cheese curds and fries marriage found in authentic Canadian recipes. Because of that, we felt there was an opportunity, especially with Canadians living in the Hollywood Hills and the South Bay beach cities, where many members of the L.A. Kings hockey team live and practice. We do good business on all the Canadian holidays, and continue to get support from Canadian groups spread out through L.A. and Orange County through their presence on Facebook and various other social media platforms. In the coming year, we look forward to working with the Canadian Consulate to get word out."

In addition to the proudly Canadian fan base, Chris says the trucks' biggest followings are in Burbank and Culver City, which are extremely centralized and accessible from Downtown, West Los Angeles and Hollywood.

Originally, Chris and Matt hoped the Poutine Brothers trucks would gain momentum from planned appearances at major music festivals like Coachella and Stagecoach in 2020. However, as the pandemic prompted the cancellation of all large public events, the brothers shifted gears even»



PHOTOS THIS PAGE FROM
TOP Kogi short rib
taco; Kogi Taqueria
tacos; Kogi
truck line; Wise
Barbecue ribs.





A Sampling Of LA's Most Popular MEALS ON WHEELS

USA

Kogi

Getting in Gear: The truck that started it all hit the road in 2008 with a humble little Korean short rib taco that sparked a Twitter explosion in front of a nightclub in Hollywood full of hungry revellers. The unique fusion of Korean and Mexican ingredients and flavours, in turn, ignited the imaginations and taste buds, leading to long lines across Los Angeles through the magic of social media. More than ten years later, Kogi has the distinction of having covered streets from the South Bay to the San Fernando Valley, Inland Empire, Ventura and Santa Barbara.

Signature Bites: World Famous Short Rib Taco, Kogi Dog, Kogi Kimchi Quesadilla, Pacman Burger, Sweet Chili Chicken Quesadilla. www.kogibbq.com

Wise Barbecue

Getting in Gear: Billed as the #1 Gourmet Food Truck for barbecue, it truly is the food truck of the stars. High profile clients include “Bob’s Burgers” TV Show, Investors Business Daily, Paramount Studios, The Annenberg Foundation, Nike and Nickelodeon. They also appear at the DTLA Art Walk, “Eat, See, Hear” movie screenings and other prime food truck destination events.

Signature Bites: USDA Certified Black Angus Beef Brisket, pepper crusted and wood-smoked for over 15 hours; Pulled pork made from Yorkshire Pork Shoulder with signature dry rub that’s slow smoked overnight; Barbecue chicken breast marinated, grilled and braised, and served with its signature sauce; Hot link craft pork sausage with a Cajun kick and a smoky finish; Sides, including cornbread, classic mac-and-cheese and Cowboy Beans, spicy and sweet BBQ style pinto beans cooked with the Signature Beef Brisket for a rich smoky flavour.

www.wisebarbecue.com

Poutine Brothers

Getting in Gear: Chris and Matt Urakami developed an appreciation for poutine during the years they toured around Canada playing club hockey. After serving up a test run among friends and knew they had to put their corporate marketing and accounting jobs into park to launch the food truck.

Signature Bites: Popular SoCal twists on Canada’s favourite comfort food (double-fried french fries with cheese curds and brown gravy) include a succulent beef short rib poutine, a spicy Indian variation with tikka masala chicken and updated Canadian smoked pork poutine. Vegan offerings (a must in L.A.) include a “Parmesan”-roasted cauliflower poutine topped with vegan gravy. Squeaky white cheddar cheese curds brought in from a dairy in Ellsworth, Wisconsin are prominently featured in all versions except the vegan offering. www.poutinebrothers.com

Pasta Sisters

Getting in Gear: As an offshoot of a nearly century-old family-owned Italian restaurant and pasta shop in Culver City, Pasta Sisters started out bringing authentic fresh pasta to local businesses for office lunches. However, since March, the food truck has worked with a frequently updated weekly schedule, targeting apartment complexes and residential areas, from Los Feliz and Koreatown to the east to the beach cities and the San Fernando Valley. Guests can choose to either order and purchase their Italian favourites at the truck or through the Best Food Truck ordering platform for pickup.

Signature Bites: Handcrafted spaghetti, papardelle, tagliatelle and gnocchi with a choice of sauces (bolognese, tomato and basil, spicy arrabbiata, pesto alla Genovese, and black truffle butter); spezzatino con

polenta (beef stew); meat lasagne; roasted organic salmon.

www.pastasisters.com

India Jones

Getting in Gear: India Jones’ trucks launched in August 2009, earning followers throughout greater Los Angeles. Chef Sumant, who comes from a restaurateur family, applies 42 years of experience and ownership of 12 different Indian restaurants (including the popular Tiger Lily and Tufaan) to create one-of-a-kind creations that reflect L.A.’s diversity while insisting on fresh, authentically Indian ingredients and seasoning.

Signature Bites: Roti Wraps (“the Indian version of the burrito”); Butter Chicken; Indian-style Soft Tacos with cilantro, tamarind and chutneys and topped with chickpea vermicelli; Taco Chaat, blue corn tortillas stuffed with sweet chili slaw, tangy and spicy chutneys, chopped onions and cilantro, topped with vermicelli.

www.indiajonesla.com

Belly Bombz

Getting in Gear: Based on a strong Sunday following, Belly Bombz transitioned from a tent at a Long Beach-area farmers’ market to its first gourmet food truck in September 2012. That first truck parked in the heart of the Cerritos area and spread its (famous, Korean-influenced) wings (as well as burgers, bowls and other comfort foods) to hungry patrons throughout L.A. and Orange County.

Signature Bites: Chicken wings offered in such preparations as Firecracker (sweet and hot Korean style), Spicy Garlic Parmesan, Bomb Dust (Memphis dry rub), Sriracha Lime and Soy Caramel (soy sauce and burnt sugar); Spicy KBBQ Pork Rice Bowl and Loaded Fries; KBBQ Short Rib Rice Bowl. www.bellybombz.com/artesia »



ERIC SHIN

...Kogi set the benchmark for everybody who came after them...




WILLIAM SLOGGATT



LOS ANGELES TOURISM

PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Kogi Truck queue; Food truck on Abbot Kinney; Miracle Mile food trucks; Poutine Brothers short rib poutine.

“while keeping their two food trucks running. They moved their “headquarters” into a shared kitchen and opened a brick-and-mortar location in Culver City, and formed an alliance with gourmet food marketplace Goldbelly.com to provide poutine lovers and curious eaters in L.A. and nationwide a variety of poutine “kits” shipped to one’s door allowing customers to prep the comfort food at home and enjoy it piping hot. This will enable their wheels to keep turning financially, so to speak, until the situation changes.

If you are visiting Los Angeles and chomping at the bit to eat like a local, scouting out a few food trucks through sites and social media may be the perfect way to do it. Not only can you safely “travel the globe” with a uniquely L.A. perspective, but also do it alongside residents who have come to swear by their favourites. 

ELYSE GLICKMAN is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.



A Sampling Of LA's Most Popular MEALS ON WHEELS

«Cafe Vietnam Truck

Getting in Gear: Established in 2018 by a Vietnamese immigrant homesick for the street foods of her home town in Nha Trang, Cafe Vietnam Truck sources mostly organic and non-gmo ingredients to craft authentic specialties and the signature banh mi sandwiches.

Signature Bites: Scrambled egg banh mi adorned with cilantro, cucumber slices, pickled daikon and carrot strands, spicy red jalapeno and soy sauce; Brie banh mi seasoned with black pepper and salt; Pork belly braised with garlic, shallots, peppercorns and coconut milk in either a banh mi or rice bowl; Chicken meatballs and tomato stew.

www.facebook.com/CafeVietnamTruck

Hummus Yummy

Getting in Gear: Shachar "Tony" Weiner set out as "the beast from the Middle East" to provide fans of Middle Eastern food, "an addiction that is good for you."

Signature Bites: The special Hummus Mach'lutta, smooth, velvety garbanzo bean dip topped with flavoured fava and garbanzo beans, a squeeze of house dressing, nutty tahini sauce, and a shower of chopped parsley; Hummus Shak'shuka, topped with egg cooked in red pepper, tomato sauce and loads of chopped parsley; Each plate is finished with puffy pita bread, sliced tomato, raw onion, green olives, pickles and pepperoncini.

www.hummusyummy.net

Zema Food Truck

Getting in Gear: To try out this Venezuelan comfort food, look for Julio Cesar Falcon Palacios's festive truck, wrapped in clever slogans and cartoon corn characters.

Signature Bites: Arepas, griddled masa pancakes, are split and filled with savoury blends of different ingredients: "Machu Picchu" is stuffed with grilled shrimp and topped with Peruvian huancaína sauce; "Pabellón" packs the arepa with shredded beef sautéed with veggies, black beans, grated white cheese, and sweet plantain. "Zema" is best when you add more avocado; Cachapas, sweet corn pancakes stuffed with any fillings of your choosing; Tequeños, crispy deep-fried cheese fingers wrapped with flaky dough. www.zematruck.weebly.com

Crispy Cuban

Getting in Gear: Perry Santos and son Joe are Cuban-Americans and have been on the road selling their homeland's most famous sandwich from a retrofitted trolley. The family's Cubanos sandwich preparation is inspired by the long-cut variation from La Cochinita in New York City that Perry enjoyed as a kid.

Signature Bites: The trolley is best known for the classic sandwich, crafted from slow-roasted pork, house-cured

ham, Swiss cheese, spicy thin-sliced dill pickle, and mustard butter pressed on crispy Cuban baguette. Other favourites include the "Tampa Cuban," adding in Genoa salami and the "Midnight Cuban," a sweet Cuban roll stacked with pastrami and pineapple coleslaw on the side.

www.facebook.com/crispycubantrolley

Dina's Dumpling

Getting in Gear: A modern Chinese food truck creating authentic handmade Chinese dumplings in a fast street style. Ingredients are simple, fresh and sourced daily.

Signature Bites: Dumplings, of course! The Beef Dumpling, stuffed with kimchi, green onion, savoury ground beef, organic beet and tofu, is rumoured to be the most popular. Other varieties on the simple menu include Pork (with cabbage, ginger, green onion), Shrimp (with sweet onion, green chili pepper, organic beet, egg and ginger), Chicken (with carrots, green onion, ginger) and Vegan (with cabbage, celery, wood ear mushroom, shitake mushroom, spinach and organic high protein tofu).

www.dinasdumpling.com

Prince of Venice

Getting in Gear: Emanuele Filiberto di Savoia's grandfather was the last king of Italy, passing along to him the title, the Prince of Venice and an inspired idea for elevated food truck fare. In 2016, he launched a regal blue food truck with a mural of Venice and his favourite maxim, "Life is a Combination of Magic & Pasta."

Signature Bites: The impossibly good truck-made pasta is prepped in a mini-open concept kitchen aboard the truck and then served in equally irresistible boat-like containers with blue belts and gondola tails. The menu is constantly rotating and can include anything from traditional tomato-sauce topped favourites to papalina (a ridged al dente ziti tossed with peas, cream, Parmesan cheese, and ham) and octopus pasta (ridged shells stained black with squid ink, piled with octopus ragu and tomatoes).

www.princeofvenicefoodtruck.com 