

GOURMET FOOD TRUCKS:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMINATION OF ORLANDO'S FOOD TRUCK SCENE

by

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## ABSTRACT

Gourmet food trucks have emerged as increasingly popular dining alternatives for consumers in today's urban landscape. Existing literature, as well as my own ethnographic research within Orlando, Florida's mobile food vending scene, reveals that food truck owner/operators utilize various strategies to establish a viable niche for themselves in this diversified and burgeoning market. Among other things, these strategies include online social networking, creating and maintaining a recognizable brand identity, collaborating with local retailers and bar owners, and incorporating organic and locally produced ingredients in their dishes whenever possible. As in other parts of the country, there appears to be a growing concern in greater Orlando about local diets and the profound and subtle messages it conveys about contemporary eating habits. I contend that dining at gourmet food trucks represents a legitimate declaration of consumer identity about individual beliefs and values. In my thesis, I examine how Orlando's gourmet food trucks offer consumers a greater selection of food options and allow locals to participate in a viable social network and community.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Gourmet food trucks have become an increasingly common feature of American cityscapes over recent years. These mobile eateries serve a variety of local and international cuisine to a consumer base that is largely comprised of trend conscious urbanites. The trucks' often quirky appearances and eclectic fare help distinguish them from both their historical food truck antecedents and most other brick-and-mortar restaurants. Arguably, this newfound appreciation of mobile gourmet eateries raises various questions that can benefit from anthropological consideration.

The overall aim of my thesis research is to ethnographically analyze the burgeoning popularity of gourmet food trucks in Orlando, Florida. Drawing heavily on theory and concepts from the anthropologist Sidney Mintz, I follow his assertion that what one eats, "is at the same time a form of self-identification and of communication;" a "way of making some kind of declaration" (1997:13). Within this theme, I argue that gourmet food trucks embody the freedom of choice and individuality represented in Mintz's ideas.

In terms of format, various chapters and subsections organize my thesis.. After examining both the historical roots of modern food trucks and the events that have contributed to their rising popularity nationwide, I consider the primary strategies gourmet food truck owner/operators employ to increase business and distinguish themselves in this highly competitive market. Next, I analyze Orlando's local food truck scene through an owner/operator's lens, by presenting four different ethnographic case studies. These in-depth profiles not only describe the everyday operations of the individual food truck owner/operators, they also trace their involvement in this growing sector of local commerce from their initial forays in gourmet food trucks to their present success and standing in Orlando's food truck

community. Similarly, these biographical sketches offer important insights into what legal and competitive obstacles individual owner/operators encounter and their efforts to forge a genuine sense of community among all participants. In concluding sections, I synthesize my ethnographic findings and discuss their relevance *vis-à-vis* three research questions: namely (1) what do local gourmet food truck operations symbolize in various economic, socio-economic, and political contexts; (2) in what ways do gourmet food trucks imbue social meaning through the various strategies they employ in both the individual and communal level; and (3) in what way have these cultural and social factors given rise to gourmet food truck's recent growth in Orlando and across U.S. cities?

Regarding my first research question, I predict several possible outcomes. Economically, I expect that the late 2000s recession created opportune circumstances for young restaurateurs to launch local gourmet truck operations as most lacked the necessary finances to open traditional standalone eateries. Similarly, I predict that the rise of gourmet food trucks represents a consumer trend involving a shift away from conventional fast food chains and brick-and-mortar restaurants to something more quirky and local. Socio-economically, I predict food marketing efforts by gourmet food truck owner/operators significantly shape local consumer perceptions about who works in this industry, what locations they work, and what type of clientele they tend to attract, thus revealing socio-economic and class divides. Politically, I argue that gourmet food trucks represent a significant aspect of the more recent and broad based trend towards consuming more organic and locally sustainable foods.

Regarding my second research question, I predict that dining at these mobile diners reflects both a deliberate recognition of the more communal aspects of eating and attempts to create a physical and virtual sense of community in addition to a statement of individual identity.

Concerning my third research question, I predict that gourmet food trucks, by forming a highly resonant brand identity through social media and employing trained chefs to conceptualize and create unique menu items, not only contributes significantly to developing a viable customer base, it also helps today's gourmet food trucks differentiate themselves from previous iterations of mobile eateries. Such strategies are essential for these restaurants-on-wheels to establish a viable market presence in Orlando and other U.S. cities.

When considered altogether, my research is rooted in a holistic body of data comprised of information derived from participant observation in the food truck community, direct semi-structured interviews with food truck owner/operators, and working directly with the gourmet food trucks in which I am studying. Of interest is determining what, if anything, makes Orlando's food truck scene unique compared to other communities in Florida and elsewhere. Equally significant is documenting the various personalities and business practices that characterize Orlando's individual food truck owner/operators. In this way, my research findings address, through my perspective and the owner/operators I worked with, how gourmet food trucks create a social environment and community in which people come together with similar food values and what those values represent.

## CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

### **Materials and Methods**

Information derived from various ethnographic techniques ground my research, to better document Orlando's gourmet food truck scene. First, I interviewed five gourmet food truck owner/operators of varying size and capitalization. Firsthand information about Orlando's gourmet food truck scene was collected through structured and semi-structured interviews approved by the University of Central Florida's Internal Review Board in June 2012.

Emphasized as individual case studies, are their personal experiences and the obstacles they overcame to reach their current status . Besides gathering both qualitative data and quantitative data such as business numbers and goals, the semi-structured interviews sought to give the owner/operators both a voice and an insider's perspective on what they think makes the local gourmet food truck community such a vital important aspect of Orlando's social, political, and economic landscape.

Second, I utilized participant observation as a primary method for gathering field data. Since food trucks are more than just one stop food joints, I participated in various local food truck bazaars and festivals as both a consumer and observer. During my visits to these gatherings, I visually recorded the events through digital photography and mapping. I also took field notes, documented customer counts, recorded food and beverage prices, and took notes on the general atmosphere of these festivities. Additionally, I asked each owner/operator to allow me to accompany him or her on a ride-along. The owners of both SwedeDish and Dixieland Diner permitted me to work several food truck events with them. By riding along during their workday operations, I gained a greater understanding of what processes and obstacles must be

undertaken, as well as gained insight into the business-customer relationships from behind the counter.

I elicited patterns and trends from both my interviews and experiences with the food truck owners as well as the literature focusing on this phenomenon. A general overview, grounded in an established sociocultural perspective, brought to greater life the actual voices of the entrepreneurs that are turning their business dreams into reality. This approach, combined with an engaged methodology featuring structured interviews with the owner/operators, participant observation, and customer perspectives on the food trucks, ultimately provided a more holistic view of Orlando's gourmet food truck community's rising popularity.

### **Interview Questions and Participant Selection**

Only owner/operators of gourmet food trucks approached as viable informants for my thesis research. As I began conceptualizing my research design, I first had to determine what differentiated today's gourmet food trucks from earlier forms of mobile vending. Over time, I began to recognize three primary characteristics that distinguish today's gourmet food trucks. These are: (1) the branding of the truck; (2) marketing through social media; and (3) a largely eclectic and unique food selection. By using these factors as an effective guide for distinguishing gourmet food trucks, I was able to approach potential research participants for my study.

Cultivating ties with potential research participants was accomplished through a variety of methods including exploiting personal connections, contacting the owner/operators directly, and through the snowball effect whereby I met new owner/operators through previously contacted gourmet food truck owners. My intention was to interview participants with varying levels of experience in the food truck community. In most cases, there was a member of the

team who was deemed “the voice,” of the owners, or the one who handled marketing and social relationships more directly. In these cases, he or she was the one who agreed to conduct the interview. Efforts were made to interview owner/operators at places of familiarity or comfort. I conducted the interviews over lunch or within the area the owner worked.

The interview questions I developed addressed myriad aspects of food truck operations. Efforts were made to gather demographic data of each owner/operator as well as highlight their varying personalities. Interview questions addressed truck branding, menu selections, and utilization of social media. I also sought elucidation about the rationales and motivations behind each of these aspects of their gourmet food truck operations. Other questions were designed to tease out how these owners felt about Orlando’s food truck scene and how it compared to other cities’ food truck scenes. At a more intimate level, questions sought information about how local gourmet food truck owners interacted and got along with each other in a constantly changing and expanding business.

### **Limitations**

Due to the scope and intimacy of Orlando’s gourmet food truck scene, the personal nature of business related issues, and fluctuating circumstances of a growing phenomenon, a number of research limitations emerged. Probably the biggest limitation I faced entailed my inability to interview the majority of Central Florida’s gourmet food truck owners. Thus, although I strived to gain greater insights into Orlando’s food truck scene, it is by no means an exhaustive investigation. With a constantly growing population of gourmet food trucks, only a select number of owner/operators were interviewed. Similarly, only a small subsection of events within Orlando’s food truck scene were attended.

Another limitation involved matters of intimacy and unique aspects of the local food truck scene. In a population where nearly everyone knows everyone else, anonymity was not possible when reporting research findings. Due to owner/operators wanting to retain proprietary knowledge over their operations, a number of responses and insights remain off the record. As such, detailed accounts of personal financial issues and other business matters remain scant. While participants were happy to speak of startup costs and bad business days versus good business days, navigating the personal, everyday financial aspects of owning a gourmet food truck proved more difficult.

Finally, the speed and frequency in which change occurs within this community emerged as a limiting factor. With Orlando's food truck scene being only around for a little more than two years, new and ongoing developments cannot be accurately identified and ethnographically examined. The rapid growth of Orlando's gourmet food trucks over recent years may leave gaps in the research, which will benefit from later future research. I should also mention that due to my thesis being primarily from an owner/operator's perspective, actual food truck customers were not interviewed or surveyed, leaving room for possible future research.

### **Overview of Chapters**

Over subsequent chapters, I will report on gourmet food trucks at both the national and local level. In Chapter Three, I present a literature review that offers an empirical foundation on which much of the existing research about current and future gourmet food trucks are rooted. In this chapter, I not only address the importance of food from an anthropological perspective, but also how food trucks play an important, if underappreciated, role in our current understanding about urban foodways and what food choices convey about ourselves at an individual and societal level. In Chapter Four and Chapter Five, I consider Orlando's local gourmet food truck

scene specifically through interviews with gourmet food truck owner/operators, participant observation on the trucks themselves, and through ethnographic techniques at various food truck events and gatherings. In Chapter Six, I synthesize my findings from those food truck owner/operators profiled in the previous section to develop a deeper and more holistic understanding of Orlando's gourmet food truck scene. In this chapter, I also apply my research within the groundwork provided by the existing literature in order to address my original research questions. In Chapter Seven, I summarize my findings and identify possibilities for future research on this topic.

## CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Anthropology of Food and Sydney Mintz**

Anthropologists have long been interested in the study of food and foodways within various cultural contexts. Seeking to better understand the traditions and practices surrounding what we eat, from where it comes, why we eat it, and what such practices convey in a symbolic sense, this anthropologic work highlights food's ever changing yet essential role in human existence. As anthropologists Sidney Mintz and Christine Du Bois argue, the:

Study of food and eating is important both for its own sake since food is utterly essential to human existence (and often insufficiently available) and because the subfield has proved valuable for debating and advancing anthropological theory and research methods. Food studies have illuminated broad societal processes such as political-economic value-creation, symbolic value-creation, and the social construction of memory. [2002:99]

Anthropological studies of this type have focused on many different aspects of human food production and consumption. These include food and identity, food scarcity, the nutritional aspects of food, and the ritual aspects of eating (Mintz and Du Bois 2002). Best situated within this genre, is the recent growth of gourmet food trucks in urban America. So far, very little scholarly attention has focused on the growing presence of gourmet food trucks in U.S. cities and what their popularity may suggest about Americans' cultural relationship with food. My research aims to delve beyond the largely superficial media attention given to Orlando's food trucks by mainstream journalists and bloggers. Specifically, I strive to create a deeper understanding of the dynamic aspects of gourmet food trucks and what they symbolize both nationally and locally.

This thesis is theoretically rooted in Mintz's ideas about the significance of what we eat and the profound and subtle messages it conveys about ourselves. As Claude Fishler states, "cooking helps to give food and its eaters a place in the world, a meaning" (1988:286). This

importance is not only reflected in our consumption of food, but also in what ingredients we utilize, how we prepare cuisine, food taste, and with whom we share food.

Increasingly utilized, is the term “foodie,” to describe those with a deep appreciation for food and foodways. Foodies have been ambiguously defined in a variety of ways. At either end of the spectrum, they can be those “who mobilize[s] their foodie status as ‘an excuse to try to act superior or fashionable,’” or “those who ‘are passionate about learning and trying new things... [And] see food as a way of appreciating life, understanding other cultures, and spending time with others’” (Johnston and Baumann 2010:57). While there is seemingly much contention about the term “foodie,” it is perhaps the most relevant word to describe those who typically frequent gourmet food truck operations.

The haute cuisine that gourmet food trucks offer local diners is what I contend helps set these mobile food vendors apart from more traditional eateries. When this artisanal fare is considered alongside their specialized branding and communication strategies, it is easy to see how these operations appeal to foodies and other consumers. Haute cuisine is notable as it “transcends local difference,” with everything in it coming from somewhere else (Mintz 1996:101). Gourmet food truck owners combine a variety of influences to ultimately create a largely unique cuisine.

In many ways, gourmet food trucks embody what Sidney Mintz describes as “food at moderate speeds;” that is, “healthy food, produced locally, for everybody” (2006:10). With an individuality and subtle political bent that effectively sets them apart from today’s industrialized, fast food consumerist mentality, I contend that gourmet food truck owner/operators and their patrons exemplify new ways of thinking about what we eat and the “performative pleasures” associated with it (Finkelstein 1998:202). To understand the phenomenon of gourmet food

trucks popularity, it is perhaps useful to examine their emergence and popularity within a historical context.

## **History**

In this subsection I discuss the history of mobile food operations in the U.S. More specifically, I trace the development of the early food truck into what can now be termed the gourmet food truck. I begin by looking at how the food truck is rooted in American history and how it has evolved over the decades into what is now an increasingly common feature of urban life across U.S. cities. I then explore the rise of the gourmet food truck, its rise in Los Angeles and its rapid spread across the U.S.

### From Cattle Drives to World War Two

The gourmet food trucks increasingly encountered in Orlando and other major U.S. are not without precedent in American history. Mobile food operations, and more specifically, food trucks, are a long-standing yet ever developing part of American history. Mobile food, in the form of push carts and street vendors have been operating in the U.S. since the 1600s. There is even evidence of the first tension between mobile food and the traditional brick-and-mortar restaurants as far back as 1691, which I will address later. In 1866, Texas rancher, Charles Goodnight, thought up the first iteration of the now iconic food truck, which was then named the chuckwagon. Within this new form of food dispensary, “chuck” referred to food while the wagon was the earlier version of the truck. These mobile kitchens were built to house the ingredients, cast iron pots, cooking utensils, and other provisions required to put together an edible meal. Goodnight created the chuckwagon to help deal with the problem of feeding those working on long cross-country cattle drives. His dishes generally included “stew, roast beef,

grits, boiled potatoes, beans and fruit pies” (Mintzer 2011:19). Goodnight arguably revolutionized the concept of mobile food by creating a vehicle that was much more transportable than the standard pushcart, much more practical than constantly delivering food supplies from the nearest town, and arguably served food tasty food as well. Following Goodnight’s lead, chuckwagons began appearing more often throughout the West to feed the wagon trains and cattle drives that were constantly traversing the US.

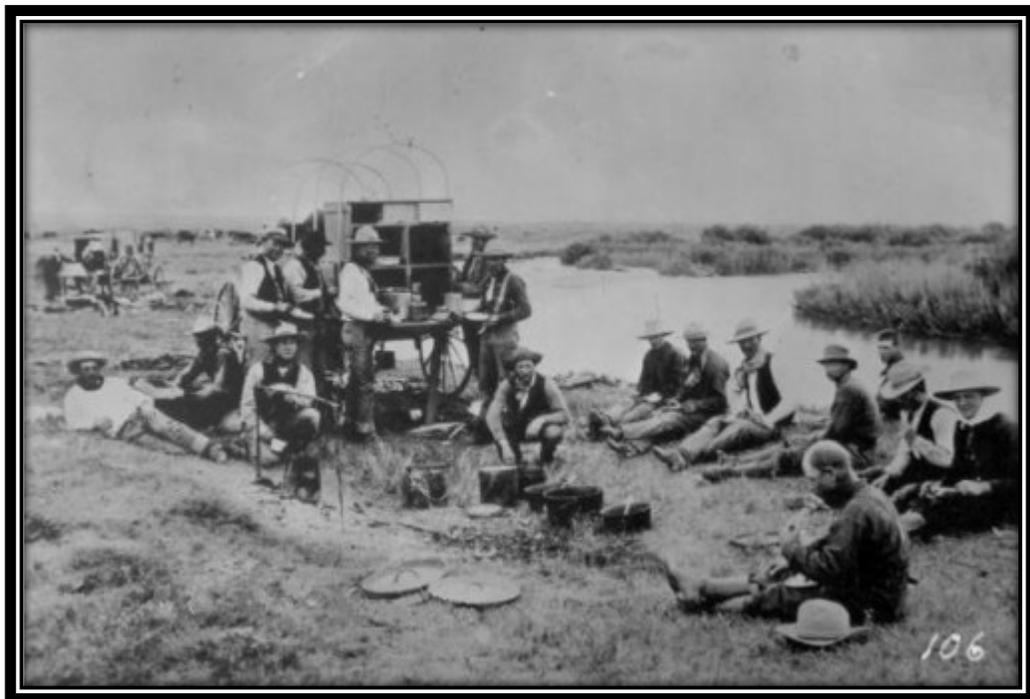


Figure 1: Chuckwagon in Wyoming from the 1880s  
Source: Dobson 2011

Much like the chuckwagons of the West, the lunch wagons of the east were born as “products[s] of necessity and utility” (Witzel 1999:11). In an era without fast food and affordable restaurant fare for the average city worker, came the birth of the lunch wagon, which provided easy, cheap, and quick lunches or late night snacks. The first iteration of the lunch wagon emerged in urban America thanks to Walter Scott of Providence, Rhode Island in 1872.

His decision to sell street food full time without pushing a mobile cart around all day compelled him to purchase a horse drawn wagon with windows on either side to sell his fares to those passing by. Except for the horse drawing the wagon, his mobile food vehicle closely resembled the food trucks of the present. A definite upgrade to a mobile cart, Scott was now able to house more ingredients and utensils in his wagon as well as move to and from places of business more quickly. “For advertising, the only requirement was a loud, boisterous voice that could proclaim the delectable qualities of one’s foods” (Witzel 1999:12). Sensing an opportunity, Scott targeted night workers as well, and appearing as a past parallel to the gourmet food truck customers today, Witzel describes that:

After some initial reluctance, Late-night workers, drunken carousers, insomniacs, street urchins, indignants, nighthawks, and a colorful assortment of felonious characters smiled upon the decidedly free-spirited lunch wagon and became passionate—if not loyal—customers. [Witzel 1999:17]

Almost immediately, others began to see the lucrative opportunities in owning and operating lunch wagons. Piggy backing off of the innovation and success of Scott’s idea of horse drawn food wagons, many others began their own version of the lunch wagon in cities throughout the East. With improvements in appearance and function, lunch and nighttime wagons were prominent throughout cities in the East by the 1900s. There were even businesses designed for building and selling these newer wagons (Gutman 2000:21). Eventually these lunch wagons were built large enough so that customers could stand inside, and later, sit, within the wagon. This breed of lunch wagon would eventually evolve and branch off into what we now know as the American Diner. However, this was not the end of mobile food.



Figure 2: Lunch Wagon from the late 1800's  
Source: Gutman 2000:33

Variations of the food truck continued to emerge because of their adaptability and mobility. The next iteration of mobile food operations came in World War One when mobile food vehicles known as field kitchens came into use to feed troops fighting in the European theater. Later during World War Two, mobile food continued to have an effect on war efforts abroad as a new generation of field kitchens was developed to serve the same purposes as their World War One antecedents. Yet, these newer iterations no longer relied on literal horsepower like their predecessors (Mintzer 2011:20).

#### Lunch Trucks to Gourmet

Beginning after WWI, the first examples of motorized food vehicles interacting with customers in an entertaining way were being launched in the U.S. In the 1920s, Harry Burt, the

creator of the Good Humor bar, began distributing his products through the very first ice cream trucks. With the promise to be clean and sanitary, as well as follow the same routes daily, he used a bell system to announce his arrival to local neighborhoods. The bells eventually evolved into the now widely familiar ice cream truck jingle (Reagan 2013). The ice cream truck jingle served yet, further example of how food trucks can combine advertising with a memorable consumer experience. While it does not have the range of the social tweet, it does serve the similar purpose of attracting attention and announcing truck's location. There was also the Oscar Mayer Weiner Mobile, which launched in 1936. This memorable publicity effort, while by no means ubiquitous, created a consumer experience that most Americans were at the time largely unaccustomed (NYDaily News 2013).



Figure 3: Good Humor Truck  
Source: Reagan 2013



Figure 4: 1936 Oscar Meyer Weinermobile  
Source: “NYDaily News” 2013.

With technological developments making it more “feasible to keep a wider range of foods fresh, cooked, and served from a mobile vehicle” along with the concomitant growth of suburbia and the increase of businesses outside of city centers in the decades after World War II, there was a continued rise of food trucks to supply snacks and lunch to factory workers or, in the case of ice cream trucks, to provide cold treats to young children (Mintzer 2011:21). It is right around this time that traditional food trucks or the so-called “roach coaches” emerged. Not only were “roach coaches” appearing more frequently around construction sites and other areas where workers congregated, but ethnic food trucks began assuming a more prominent role as well. In urban areas with large immigrant populations such as New York and Los Angeles, food trucks became an economically feasible business for people just arriving in the U.S. Since then,

traditional food trucks such as Los Angeles' taco trucks have played an integral role in city life. It is, thus, probably unsurprising that first gourmet food truck rose to fame in Los Angeles.



Figure 5: "Roach Coach" at a construction site in Austin, Texas  
Source: Castillo 2009

With almost every major U.S. city having their own version of "roach coaches" and traditional ethnic food trucks, it appeared that few changes were in store for the food truck formula. Gourmet chef, Roy Choi, decided to radically reimagine the food truck concept with his Kogi Korean BBQ truck. He was not only among the first to serve something more eclectic than the traditional tacos to which Los Angelinos were accustomed, he was also the first to use social media as a way to advertise and tweet his location. Named "America's First Viral Eatery," by *Newsweek* in 2009, the Kogi Korean BBQ truck's success rose dramatically when it

traded the traditional method of serving in one place and creating a customer base, with using popular social media to reach an expanding trend-savvy clientele (Romano 2009).

Combining his newfound digital marketing savvy with a menu that fused elements of Asian and Mexican cuisine, chef Choi was able to live up to the social media hype. Witnessing the success of chef Choi, and arguably because of the recession occurring at the time, many budding chefs and entrepreneurs followed suit and launched their own food truck operations. Instead of following the traditional formula, they offered a viable dining alternative that combined eclectic and often fusion cuisine with a stylized brand rooted in social media marketing. As a cheaper alternative for aspiring restaurateurs than traditional brick-and-mortar eateries, these gourmet food trucks grew increasingly popular in Los Angeles and, eventually, elsewhere in the U.S.



Figure 6: Kogi BBQ Truck with a typical line in Los Angeles 2009  
Source: Michael 2009

### **Contemporary Gourmet Food Trucks**

In this section, I analyze today's gourmet food trucks and how they differ from more traditional food trucks and stationary eating establishments such as fast food, quick-casual, and sit-down restaurants. I begin by briefly summarizing the scholarly work gourmet food trucks have received thus far and examine these sources in detail over subsequent sections. I have

divided these summaries into the following sub-sections: (1) how gourmet food trucks are slowly shedding the “roach coach” stigma their traditional brethren have obtained in the past; (2) the obstacles gourmet food trucks are facing through tension with brick-and-mortar restaurants along with increasing city regulations; (3) the ways in which gourmet food trucks utilize social media to establish and market their brands; and (4) how more and more trucks are appealing to a politically conscious niche through the use of organic and locally sustainable cuisine.

As a brief caveat, it is important to note that I sparingly mention Orlando’s local food truck scene in this review of the available literature. I will go into further detail of how Orlando fits in with or distinguishes itself from other U.S. cities in later thesis chapters.

#### Academic Considerations

It is evident from the growing number of print and online articles that public and media interest concerning food trucks is increasing. Local journalists not only highlight the municipal regulations to which food trucks must adhere, they also emphasize the positive and negative dynamics that characterize relations between food trucks and established brick-and-mortar restaurants (Westfall 2011). What appears lacking in these accounts is a more scholarly perspective from anthropologists and others in the social sciences and humanities on this growing phenomenon. As previously mentioned, my thesis research aims to fill some of the existing gaps in our knowledge of gourmet food trucks through a holistic examination of them in Orlando and through ethnographic research on the phenomenon.

The academic research on food trucks that has been compiled by anthropologists and others in the 2000s mainly focuses on a few specific areas of these mobile vendors. Two scholarly articles in particular, Ernesto Hernandez’s “LA’s Taco Truck War: How Law Cooks Food Culture Contests” (2010) and Allison Caldwell’s “Will Tweet for Food: Microblogging

Mobile Food Trucks – Online, Offline, and In Line,” (2011) make important contributions to current understanding of food trucks in Los Angeles and New York respectively. Specifically, these works highlight how food trucks represent much more than merely what people presently enjoy eating. Hernandez and Caldwell not only emphasize important distinctions between traditional and largely working class food trucks and the emerging gourmet food truck community, they also raise questions about prevailing perceptions of socio-economic and class divides.

Hernandez considers how Los Angeles food trucks are described socio-economically in popular discourses in 2008 and 2009. He also examines the impact that enforcement of municipal codes can have on food trucks while also making predictions on “future efforts to regulate mobile food vendors, inside and outside” (2010:3). His article provides arguments both for and against food truck operations and their impact on local brick-and-mortar restaurants and area residents. Hernandez critically contrasts the Los Angeles Taco Trucks known as *loncheros*, with newer gourmet food trucks. His focus on *loncheros* emphasizes the role of immigrants in their operations and their perceived low socio-economic status. He argues that such sentiments manifested in increased regulations thought to stem from anti-immigrant views and perceptions of class and identity.

He argues both that “cultural values are reflected in food practices, i.e. how food is eaten, sold, prepared, cultivated, and produced,” and “food is not just a matter of biology and personal taste, but how food is a part of and represents communal identities” (2010:3-4). Newer Los Angeles gourmet food trucks are perceived as a different breed of mobile eateries given their specialized gourmet and fusion cuisine, the tech savvy of their largely non-immigrant owner/operators, and their use of online social networking to promote their businesses. These

more upscale food trucks are also permitted to “operate in areas in front of nightclubs or bars, close to universities, or in trendy young adult neighborhoods...” (2010:9). Revealingly,

Hernandez states:

It’s fair to say that while some food trucks in Boyle heights and East LA were subject to local government restrictions, fines, and jail time consequent to illegality, another style of food truck was receiving notoriety as gastronomically innovative and a growing popular cultural trend. [2009:11]

Similar to Hernandez, Caldwell considers how the recent utilization of online social networking by gourmet food truck operators influences the way consumers think and socialize about food. It also addresses “what is the actual and virtual experience of the new food truck consumer.” She further examines how this new form of food truck has transformed New York’s local street food scene and what type of commentary it creates about “class, technology, and consumption” at the neighborhood level (2010:308). Caldwell highlights the online social networking and virtual community characteristics of gourmet food trucks. Like Hernandez, she distinguishes between traditional food trucks and their more recent and upscale counterparts.

She focuses on how New York’s gourmet food trucks engage consumers through real and virtual communications. This engagement is significant because gourmet food truck owner/operators “are directing social communication from online to offline, and ultimately, to the mobile food truck where people collect and wait in line,” thus, creating a “food forward community of belonging that lives in both online and offline spaces” (2011:309). Following Twitter feeds, speaking with food truck owners, and eating from various gourmet mobile eateries, provided Caldwell an entrance into the physical and virtual food truck community. She emphasizes that gourmet food trucks provide experiences not typical of traditional street food

fare, at times, it is “like walking into a dramatic and stimulating arena, a traveling troupe of sorts” (2011:314).

Caldwell also details the eclectic and unorthodox fare served by New York’s gourmet food trucks. She notes how this gravitation towards a more “haute” style of cuisine parallels the move of many street food veterans towards the exotic and unfamiliar fare of Middle Eastern chicken and rice trucks that emerged locally in the 1990s. According to her, consumers are constantly searching to satisfy their “curiosity about otherness, confront the impulse to explore the unknown, and to climb the mountain because it’s there” (2011: 315). She posits that gourmet food trucks have created a sub-culture that may provide an early example for an evolution of things to come in New York City street food. Like Hernandez, Caldwell notes, “food and technology influence and separate this emerging street food from traditional vending, exposing larger issues related to class” (2011:317). Optimistically, she believes that gourmet food trucks are beginning to blur class lines and may ultimately eliminate the “cuisine/class division of who eats what” (2011:317) because of the Internet’s growing accessibility and the fact that gourmet food trucks are offering more specialty street cuisine.

#### Shedding the “Roach Coach” Stigma

It is noted that in relation to gourmet food trucks, modern technology has become more affordable, sanitary, and efficient, thus offering a wider range of possibilities in menu creation as well as shedding the stigma of food trucks being known as “roach coaches” (Mintzer 2011:20). According to the *Wall Street Journal*’s Katy McLaughlin, “Lunch trucks once represented the nadir of culinary achievement, conjuring up images of withered hot dogs and hygienically-challenged kebabs” (2009:1). Despite traditional food trucks having developed the perception of being unsanitary, they still form the majority of the food truck population with only an extremely

small proportion of operating food trucks being considered gourmet (Mintzer 2011:21). As of 2011, in New York City specifically, there are “4,100 *licensed* street food vendors” (emphasis added) of which “the new Twitter-based mobile food truck makes up between 25-40 units operating during a given time, less than 1%” (Caldwell 2011:307).

What gourmet food trucks are doing now – bringing exotic and unfamiliar foods to the public – is exactly what traditional food trucks were doing in the 1990s. Taco trucks and “Middle Eastern street food began to divert culinary attention in the street away from what was deemed then, traditional fare of hotdogs, pretzels, and the like” (Caldwell 2011:315). Although slightly stigmatized as violating health codes and serving substandard fare, the traditional food trucks that increased in popularity in the 1990s and early 2000s now saturate the market and are remain a booming business, which has provided many immigrants a “foothold into the American dream” (Caldwell 2011:308).

This highlights an important distinction between the food trucks of yesteryear and the gourmet food trucks of today. The “emerging micro-blogging food truck vendor population is predominantly non-immigrant, and where they are not, class and status usually sets them apart” (Caldwell 2011:307). This difference is important because of the cultural values associated within cuisine and how “where and what one eats, is vital to distinctions, based on gender, class, and race” (Hernandez 2010:4). Although there is an increased popularity in food trucks nationwide due to the unique integration of Internet technology to spread their word, Patrick Kuh of the *L.A. Times* makes the point that “Despite all the recent clamor, the city has had a long-term relationship with food trucks” (Kuh 2011).

Los Angeles is one of the focal points for the success of food trucks, both the traditional taco trucks and the modern gourmet food trucks. Hernandez argues that the prevalence of

Mexican food in the Southwest, including their abundance of immigrant run food trucks, "has served as a means of articulating communal pride and bonding..." (2010:22). "Street food, including from trucks, has long history in both L.A. and Mexico," and is a "cultural practice unique to L.A.'s car, neighborhood, immigrant, dining, and Latino cultures" (2010:23). Whether it be office workers grabbing a quick bite at lunch, pedestrians who are in the mood for ethnic food but do not care to visit a sit-down restaurant, or immigrants who want to eat food closer to home, Hernandez makes the point that "Culturally, food trucks represent culinary innovation, shared public space, foodie culture, associations with Latino and migrant cultures, and meals made more accessible to consumers" (2010:24).

Even in cases where local governments have a long standing relationship with food truck owner/operators, there may be certain areas of the city that are closed off to their operations. Food truck stops opening in more upscale neighborhoods reflects the ways in which modern gourmet food trucks have accrued "cultural capital" that permits them to "acculturate themselves into a local community of consumption that reasserts itself upon followers of higher cuisine with common social (networking) roots." While traditional taco trucks may be disallowed from operating in more affluent enclaves such as trendier spots in Los Angeles, "food and technology here, influence and separate this emerging street food from traditional vending, clearly exposing issues related to class" (Caldwell 2010:316-317).

As previously mentioned, there exists the perception that traditional food trucks and "roach coaches" are unsanitary and serve relatively subpar fare. Beginning with chef Roi's launch of his Kogi Korean BBQ, gourmet food trucks have been slowly reversing this stigma. The eclectic Mexican-Korean fusion cuisine served by Kogi BBQ includes delicacies such as Kogi Kimchi Quesadillas or Kogi BBQ short rib tacos. Listed in *Food & Wine* magazine as one

of 2010's "'Best New Chef,' Chef Roi Choi received an honor limited to expensive and high-end restaurants" and has effectively set the bar for what a gourmet food truck can accomplish (Hernandez 2010:9). With cleaner and more stylized trucks, finer ingredients, and a wider range of cooking techniques, today's gourmet food trucks are less stigmatized as the "roach coaches" of the past and viewed more as on the go gourmet experiences.

### Legal Regulations and the Battle versus Standalone Restaurants

The local specific laws governing the operation of food trucks have the ability to contribute to their success, render them virtually useless, or even deny their entire existence. It is up to food truck owner/operators to familiarize themselves with the complexities of the laws and regulations in their area. The overly restrictive ordinances placed on food trucks can effectively eliminate a sub-culture at its roots. Lisa Fickensher in "The Rise and Stall of Food Trucks," interviewed New York City food truck owners and relays their belief that "the most devastating blow to the industry has been what truck owners describe as onerous city regulations, in particular, a parking rule that prevents the trucks from doing business in most commercial districts." Since the resurfaced parking rules have begun to be reinforced, food truck owners are going out of business and many are seeing sharp drops in their revenue, some as much as 70% (Fickensher 2011). With the increased popularity of food trucks being so recent, other areas of the U.S. have yet to experience the growth of gourmet food trucks and do not have regulations concerning them at all.

Parking restrictions and other ordinances are but only some of the hurdles that food truck owner/operators must overcome in order to legally conduct business. It is not as simple as just buying a truck and outfitting it with a kitchen. In most cases, food trucks must comply with the same health and sanitation standards as restaurants as well as go through the proper channels to

become licensed to start a personal business and pay their taxes. With their increased popularity and rising media profile, food trucks have come under increased scrutiny from local authorities. Whether this attention is negative or positive, the “law is an important utensil in limiting or fostering these choices” (Hernandez 2010:23). Overall, there is need for a deeper understanding of food truck culture and the socio-economic forces that have fostered it, for as Hernandez states, “Such short-sighted regulations may kill a cultural practice unique to LA” as well as other cities (2010:23). Hernandez highlights a number of relevant court cases known locally as the “Taco Truck War,” in which organizations for both kinds of food trucks, *locheros* and newer gourmet trucks, acted together and fought against increased parking regulations and enforcement. Ultimately, the food truck plaintiffs won their cases, overturning laws that were deemed arbitrary and discriminatory in nature (2010:18). This case from Los Angeles reiterates the fact that regardless of the city in which food trucks operate, they “must function within these complex discourses in law, policy and culture” (2010:24).

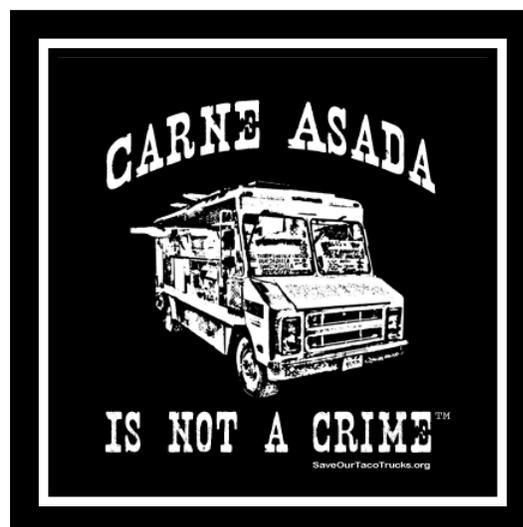


Figure 7: During Los Angeles' Taco Truck War  
Source: “The Taco Truck War” 2008

Gourmet food trucks have already gathered momentum and are now a thriving

community that deserves serious attention. Much of the attention coming from their brick-and-mortar counterparts, however, is largely negative. As previously mentioned, tension between mobile food and brick-and-mortar restaurants dates back at least as far as 1691, when an ordinance preventing food vendors from opening until two hours after public markets were open was passed (Mintzer 2011:19). The conflict stems from the fact that, although food trucks and restaurants may provide two entirely different experiences, they both compete for the potential sales of dining consumers. A possible reason to account for the rising popularity of food trucks coincidentally correlates with a decrease in restaurant sales. This trend is related to the economic recession that began in 2008. Even with property prices and start-up costs decreasing, budding restaurateurs still may be unable to afford the initial investments or risk the potential failures of their ventures. The start-up costs for food trucks, however, are much less, with the primary cost being the truck itself and outfitting it to serve as a restaurant-on-wheels. With little in the way of external costs related to rent, staff, and property taxes, food truck owner/operators hold certain advantages over those owning a brick-and-mortar establishment.

Because of the lack of additional costs in operating their business, food truck owner/operators are often able to sell their food at cheaper prices. The economic factors of the recent recession helped food trucks on two major points. Not only did it create an atmosphere of risk taking for potential food truck owners to pursue their culinary ventures in a time of economic turmoil, it also altered the economic landscape so that consumers were more likely to venture out for more affordable street food. As the popularity of food trucks continues to grow, some brick-and-mortar restaurants are reporting a concomitant decline in consumer sales. Indeed, this has caused some to scapegoat food trucks even as the "competition arguments are varied, at the heart they comment on how mobile vending disrupts restaurants' business

practices" (Hernandez 2010:19). Food trucks often can park directly next to established restaurants and, thereby, potentially steal sales away from these businesses. In these cases, it is arguable that the gourmet food trucks that pursue such practices are violating long held, unwritten rules of business ethics.

Against this backdrop, Hernandez highlights the fact that it is ultimately a matter of consumer choice about where they decide to take their business. Restaurant chains are often situated next to each other, along with coffee shops, fast food establishments, and other dining establishments. Yet, it seems that food trucks, perhaps because of their ability to swoop in and swoop out, are unfairly accused of disrupting longstanding business practices. Based on such perceptions of unfair competition by established restaurateurs, it is "assumed that food truck consumers would spend at a restaurant if trucks were not permitted to vend" (Hernandez 2010:20). Yet, these sentiments fail to consider the differing experiences and settings gourmet food trucks provide compared to traditional restaurants. Food trucks are still associated with an "on-the-go" mentality. Diners rarely have tables and seats provided. Food is served on disposable plates, baskets, or tin foil. The utensils are usually plastic. Customers have to stand in line and eat outside where they may be "exposed to street noise, traffic and weather" (Hernandez 2010:20). If anything, it would seem the food trucks main competitors are fast food restaurants such as McDonalds or Burger King, where table service and personal attention is largely absent.

Yet, in some cases, food trucks are siphoning away sales from traditional brick-and-mortar restaurants. What often sets food trucks apart from their brick-and-mortar counterparts is the individuality that each truck conveys with their often unique branding and cuisine. Jessica Zerrer believes "A growing segment of the middle class is bored with the Applebee's, TGI

Friday's, and Chili's which sell everything but lack the personality and individuality in both food and eating experiences" (Zerrer 2011). It is not only the chain restaurants that people are getting bored of. In general, the way brick-and-mortar restaurants are structured makes it nearly impossible to launch a successful business with an adventurous and unorthodox menu.

Restaurants generally need to be well-established before they can successfully incorporate more eclectic foods into their menu. Often the final menu decisions in restaurants are a manifestation of various opinions: the vision of the executive chef, the owners, the investors, the regional food preferences, etc. [Zerrer 2011]

Even those mom-and-pop restaurants, which many diners prefer over corporate chains, have only limited freedom experimenting with their menus and remaining innovative compared to gourmet food trucks. It is the singular relationship between owners of gourmet food trucks and their consumers that provides the opportunity for innovation and creativity.

It seems that a few restaurant owners are beginning to recognize the value of operating a food truck by launching their own mobile vending operations. One example is Mr. Blank, "the chef and owner of Hudson's on the Bend, in Austin, Texas" (McLaughlin 2009:2). The owner of Hudson realized the potential of targeting different audiences and the ability to gather revenue through selling his restaurant food at lower prices via food truck. Where an average check at his restaurant may average around \$75, his food truck, the Mighty Cone, sells his specialties for under \$10. In an environment of economic instability, (his restaurants revenue was down by 20% - 25% in 2009 compared to 2007), his mobile vending operations more than made up the lost revenue. The extra revenue is now able to go towards improving the standalone restaurant or expanding his line of food trucks. Whatever the reason for starting up a food truck, it is becoming evident that to succeed as a gourmet food truck owner/operators, it is necessary to stand apart from the multitude of restaurants and fast food chains already operating. A major

contributor to the rising popularity of gourmet food truck is the individual personality and branding owner/operators create for themselves, along with their unique gourmet menus.

### Social Media

The integration of online social networking for marketing purposes has become largely indispensable for burgeoning gourmet food trucks. Now recognized as integral components in the success and excitement attributed to gourmet food trucks, are social networks, such as Twitter, Facebook, Foursquare, and Instagram. These websites have allowed gourmet food truck owner/operators to develop an online and physical community around their brands. The use of social media goes far beyond only updating customers to a trucks locations or new additions to the menu. Rich Mintzer is quick to advise that, "If you are going to open up this type of two-way conversation, you shouldn't just use it for one-way communication" (2011:113).

Gourmet food truck owners will use Twitter to "tell stories about customers, show photos of them, and build a community" (Mintzer 2011:112). Their use of social networking allows them to personally communicate with their customers and build a deeper rapport where their patrons become something more than paying customers; they become fans, friends, or as Twitter labels them, Followers.

As mentioned earlier, Los Angeles' Kogi Korean BBQ has been identified as a leading pioneer in the use of social media and has been "dubbed 'America's First Viral Eatery' by Newsweek" (Choy 2010:1). Kogi BBQ is among the first to successfully utilize current social media outlets. It is truly more than the sum of its parts as it utilizes "bright colors, graphic designs and recognizable labels," as well as embraces "high-tech and online branding" (Choy 2010:1). All of these accolades reflect their success and their large online following which, as of September 2013, is over 110,000 followers on Twitter and almost 35,000 likes on Facebook,

more than any other gourmet food truck nationwide.

"As users compose and forward tweets, they create their own social networks and personal brands" (Caldwell 2010:308). Through this method, they are able to build social capital that, with time, will translate into economic capital once their allure spreads and reaches increasingly more potential customers. The use of social media is unique in its ability to use virtual connections to "persuade, and direct followers to the street food they provide," which in turn "creates a communication that invokes subjective conversation around a substantive object, food, that will be sought after for actual consumption" (Caldwell 2010:310). When potential customers are actively following a food truck online, it creates a much different dynamic and social experience once the customers are finally "in line." Waiting in line and purchasing food at a gourmet food truck can be appreciably different than placing an order at a McDonalds' or Burger King counter. Those feelings of community or group affiliation that emerge among followers of a favorite gourmet food truck allow social interactions that may never occur in the impersonal confines of other eating establishments. Alison Caldwell states that by gourmet food "Appealing to physical and social consumption of food and information, tweeting food trucks are contributing towards a culture of relevant, content-rich information exchange, online, offline, and in line" (2010:310).

Many gourmet food truck owner/operators strive to create a carnivalesque atmosphere around their vending operations. Wafels and Dinges, an especially popular food truck in New York City, has a unique way of challenging their customers online to come to them in person and sing certain songs or provide impersonations in the hopes of receiving free dinges. A tweet may read "Happy Sunday! We're on 86 btwn 2 & 3 all day today... hooray! Do an impression of a penguin for 1 free dinges." Such messages allow followers to step out of their virtual avatar and

transform into “an actual subjective person in line. True physical identity is revealed.” To further expand upon this process, customers have the ability to return to the virtual world and relay their experience to their own established online community with a tweet such as “@waffletruck they loved my penguin! And I love their waffles!” (Caldwell 2010:311,312). Suddenly, getting food becomes more than the simple act of eating, it is akin to “walking into a dramatic and stimulating arena,” and awards loyal customers “with a sense of belonging to a hi-tech and hip virtual and physical community” (Caldwell 2010:314,312).

### Being Green

Along with the “new breed of lunch truck” being “aggressively gourmet” and “tech-savvy,” many are also “politically correct” (McLaughlin 2009:1). Beyond the recent economic downturn that helped spur the food truck movement and their unique use of web technologies to appeal to broader socio-economic classes, gourmet food trucks can also probably attribute some of their success to the way they conduct business locally, politically, and aesthetically. Sidney Mintz reminisces about the days in which the basic foods people consumed never “came from more than perhaps a dozen miles away” (Wilk 2006:1). “Many people are beginning to bemoan the loss of a rich, highly personal culinary past,” and are seeking alternatives in which they can be more sustainable as well as support organic, local food sources (Wilk 2006:9). Mintz, in Wilk’s “Fast Food/Slow Food,” wonders if the local and personal times of food in the past:

Should be brought back, not only for ecology’s sake, but also for the renewed meaning they can provide, in giving us, in addition to the recognition of our own mortality, a measureable human existence. If this is so, then a cuisine for the future will be as diverse as the world’s peoples are: a cuisine that respects locality and distinctiveness, that does not make the erasure of cultural difference, the obliteration of time and space, and the mass production of satisfaction the best measures that we’ve got of human progress. [Wilk 2006:9-10]

Throughout the U.S., there are examples of mobile vending aligning with the Slow Food

Movement. These include The Green Truck which is fueled by vegetable oil in Los Angeles and sells ‘sustainably harvested’ fish tacos” as well as the RoliRoti food truck in San Francisco which “serves free-range chicken, heritage pork and local lamb, prepared by owner Thomas Odermatt, a Swiss former organic farming student” (McLaughlin 2009:1). The Happy Pig food truck owner/operators from Indiana were “drawn to the possibilities of mobile food because they perceive it to ‘operate on a different circuit’ from the fast food and traditional restaurant industries” (Zerrer 2011). The flexibility of being their own bosses allows the owners Eric and Tony to create a specialized menu that reflects their particular tastes as well as purchase the food from the sources they wish to support. Accordingly, they are able to serve exclusively “organically grown and locally sourced food” in order to support their philosophy that “the happier the pig, the better the bacon” (Zerrer 2011).

In many ways, food trucks represent the most viable supporters of the Slow Food Movement as they operate independently and locally and are able to establish a relationship with the community through modern social networking. Such individuality grants them the ability to move beyond the current “fast food” mentality of treating food only as a means for profit and its negative effects toward an erosion “of difference— a settling for the mediocre – flattening variation, [and the] dissolving [of] subtlety” (Wilk 2006: 10).

“Claude Levi-Strauss said things should be ‘not only good to eat, but also good to think,’” and Alison Caldwell adds that food should also be “good to feel” (2010:319). Mintz believes that we cannot just “legislate fast food away,” and he doubts “whether we can bring slow food to more than a modest fraction of the world’s people,” but he believes that if foods can move at what he calls “moderate speeds” than “why not make our goal good and healthy food, produced locally, for everybody?” (Wilk 2006: 10). Jessica Zerrer believes food truck operators

have succeeded and “have found the middle ground, good food at moderate speeds, by celebrating innovation, creativity, self-expression, accessibility, and most significantly, the pleasure of food (Zerrer 2011).

### **Chapter Summary**

Modern gourmet food trucks are seemingly able to transcend themselves by becoming more than the sum of their individual parts. Throughout their rich history, roots in diverse ethnicities, struggles with government regulations, and battles against their brick-and-mortar counterparts, gourmet food trucks have evolved into a personal and emotional experience at multiple levels. From local food truck rallies to consumers tracking down the next location of their favorite truck online; from Korean BBQ tacos in Los Angeles to spicy crab nachos in Orlando; food truck owners are creating brands and identities that reflect their own personalities just as they meet their customers’ needs. By using digital social media and reimagining ethnic cuisines, gourmet food truck owner/operators are reshaping the traditional food truck into a socially relevant vehicle. If anything, they are affecting change and acting as a force that goes beyond good food at good prices.

Clearly, further research on this intriguing topic is warranted. The rising popularity of food trucks not only reflects the cultural values behind food, they also point to larger issues such as socio-economic divides and perceptions and local sustainability. The success of gourmet food trucks has caught the attention of those in local government as well as the mainstream media. However, their popularity and the issues they raise could benefit from a more critical anthropological assessment. In the next chapter, I will add ethnographic depth to these matters by presenting profiles of several different food truck owner/operators from the greater Orlando area.

## CHAPTER FOUR: GOURMET FOODTRUCKS OF ORLANDO

### **Introduction**

Orlando has developed a vibrant gourmet food truck scene over recent years. Traditional food trucks have long existed prior to the emergence of the local gourmet food truck scene and while an in-depth analysis of traditional mobile food vending in Orlando goes beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to note that old-style food trucks and push carts did lay the groundwork for today's popular gourmet food truck scene.

Orlando's first gourmet food trucks began operations in early 2011. These newly launched ventures included Korean BBQ Taco Box, Big Wheel Truck, Yum Cupcake Truck, Redeye BBQ, and the Crooked Spoon. Each individual truck owner/operator began with their own business model and notion of how they would usher in Orlando's gourmet food truck scene. Orlando's first big step in introducing gourmet food trucks to the population was when a local blogger, by the name of Mark Baratelli, coordinated local mobile food vendors for Orlando's first food truck bazaar. The first event was held at Discovery Church in Downtown Orlando on March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2011 and was immediately successful. It seemed as if Orlando consumers were ready to embrace the gourmet food truck phenomenon. More than two years after this inaugural event, the gourmet food truck scene continues to grow, spreading into surrounding cities such as Windermere, Maitland, Apopka, Kissimmee, Titusville, and others. Each city allowing these events saw the increased business potential and community aspects of local food truck gatherings.

With now over 50 trucks operating in the city, the local food truck scene is constantly shaping and adapting to an ever changing scene as it becomes increasingly popular. Some trucks have gone out of business, while others have thrived. The city has increased regulations and

groups such as the Central Florida Food Truck Alliance have formed to support and lobby against those regulations. As previously mentioned, my goal in this thesis is to examine Orlando's gourmet food truck scene from the perspectives of both owner/operators as well as regular customers. Accordingly, I interviewed five different owner/operators of gourmet food trucks from various backgrounds. I also worked with two of these owner/operators to better understand what went on behind the scenes of serving hundreds of customers at these food truck events. Finally I attended many of these events both by myself and with others to truly get a feeling for, document, and enjoy what was really going on in Orlando's gourmet food truck scene.

### **Case Studies**

Each case study presented here is based primarily on my interactions with the owner/operators listed and the semi-structured interview I conducted with them. I give a brief introduction into how I came to meet each owner/operator and a brief summary of them and their truck. In each case I try to touch on important aspects of gourmet food trucks, including, but not limited to, making the decision to start the business, obtaining a truck and the licenses necessary to operate, choice of branding and cuisine, their use of social media, how they fit both into Orlando's food truck scene, and how they get along with other gourmet food truck owners. In the cases of SwedeDish and Dixieland Diner, I also include the insight I obtained while working various events with them. In each case study, I conclude by summarizing my perception of the owner/operator and how I believe they fit into and contribute to Orlando's gourmet food truck scene.

## The Yum Yum Cupcake Truck



Figure 8: Alex Marin on left, Joey Coincella on Right.  
Source: Yum Yum Cupcake Facebook page

Joey Coincella is the first person I interviewed for my thesis. I wanted to contact him initially because he and his partner, Alex Marin, launched one of the original and most successful gourmet food trucks in Orlando. My original plan was to meet them while they were working at a local food truck event to introduce myself and explain my research objectives.

With Joey and Alex continually engaged with other business affairs, I quickly found out from their employees that they rarely work these kinds of festivities.. Thus, I decided to email Joey and describe my thesis project to him. He immediately replied with enthusiasm and interest for my project. Through a number of email exchanges, we scheduled an appointment to meet at the Yum Yum Cupcake office/bakery for an interview.

I met Joey at his office/bakery one morning in March 2013. From the business card he handed me to the way the office was decorated, it was apparent that Yum Yum Cupcakes was of central importance to him. If I took one thing away from our interview, it was that he cared profoundly about his business; almost as if it was an extension of himself. During our chat he openly acknowledged how hard it was to own and operate a gourmet food truck. Even going so far as to say that, the biggest drawback to mobile vending was how stressful and time consuming running this kind of business can be. Yet, at the same time, he also noted that there is nothing more satisfying than starting up something on your own and making it successful by one's own initiative and dedication.

I could clearly tell that his energy is not just dedicated to "making a buck," as he values being part of a larger community. Through his Yum Yum Cupcake business, he has donated hundreds of cupcakes, held fundraisers for various causes, and has contributed thousands of dollars to breast cancer awareness. Running a business was once only a dream for him and his partner. It has now become a thriving brand with four full time and six part time employees. They now have two trucks and their very own bakery and office located near Downtown Orlando. Along his office-walls are various accolades and thank you letters, some written in crayon and others more professionally crafted. Although we do not tour the bakery section, I know there is at least one person back there baking for that night's Tasty Tuesday, an event

whereby both gourmet food truck owners and bar owners ply their wares. Joey tells me they expect to sell about 30 dozen cupcakes for tonight.

Joey, age 29, and Alex, age 30, have been together for eight years at the time of our interview. Joey was an Organizational Communications major at UCF and met Alex, who went to Florida State University and then worked at the Marriot in Orlando in the hospitality industry. After Joey graduated from UCF in 2005, they both moved to San Francisco where Joey worked in magazine publishing and Alex continued to work in hospitality. While living in San Francisco, gourmet food trucks were starting to become popular in major cities on the West Coast. Joey reveals his knowledge of the beginning of gourmet food trucks by mentioning Chef Roi of Kogi BBQ:

So you had this guy who took a food truck, which is not really romantic or glamorous, and he put a really cool fusion Asian Mexican, two populations that are really big in LA, and he put a real gourmet spin on it. Fresh ingredients and it was cheap too. I guess due to how LA's zoning laws you couldn't stay stationary for too long. So he would post on his Facebook or tweet out, I don't even know if Twitter was out then at this point, and that's how he kind of really started the standards of how all of us operate now.

After living in San Francisco they moved to Philadelphia, where, he noted, gourmet food trucks were just beginning to emerge in popularity.

I'm from Philly and I grew up with the food trucks that we all have known. That concept of eating street food was nothing new to me. It was the type of food and the type of people that were behind the food trucks that is something that was definitely new.

It was in Philadelphia that Joey and Alex got the idea of launching a food truck of their own. Having lived in Orlando, he explained their reasoning to selecting it as the location to start up their food truck business.

You have this city that there are a lot of people in, and it's so new that you don't have a lot of things that people love when living in a big city. So there's a need

for a lot of stuff here, but not a lot of people doing it. So the city itself is very small business friendly. I thought it would be a great idea to be the first food truck as opposed to Philly where there's already three cupcake trucks. There was this huge market.

He further added that they chose to sell cupcakes because of the pastry's simple design and utility. People are able to buy cupcakes individually or by the dozen. They are also very street-friendly in that you can walk around and enjoy them without making a huge mess, a factor he believes is very important for mobile food. It becomes obvious that he has done a lot of research on the topic as well, as he is careful to point out that cupcakes are not just a "trend," because they have been popular for years. "Everyone's saying, 'oh well, when is this cupcake thing going to be over?' We're going on like 20 years now, people, they're not going anywhere!" They are also able to create some very interesting cupcake flavors that reflect the eclecticism most people expect of gourmet food trucks. Many of the flavors are even voted in by fans of Yum Yum through Facebook. One of my favorites is the Ballad of El Churro, a "cinnamon cake, filled with Dulce de Leche sour cream filling, dipped in cinnamon and sugar and topped with a rich mascarpone buttercream." Perhaps one of the most interesting ones I came across was a maple bacon cupcake that used the bacon fat from a fellow gourmet food truck, C&S Brisket Bus, as a primary ingredient.

Joey and Alex saw an opportunity to start gourmet food trucks in Orlando. As Joey puts it, because he and Alex "had always talked about owning a business ...it was important [for them] to not let that be a dream that got away." Thus, they moved back to Orlando with the goal of being the first gourmet food truck in the city. Although a couple of trucks opened up only a few weeks before them, they still met with many of the obstacles encountered when trying

something without precedent in a city. When I asked what some of the tougher hurdles that they faced at the outset were, he responded,

It was finding out that information, no one knew what I was talking about. And now you can Google food trucks and thousands of them are for sale and people who can make them, they wrap food trucks, and now there's insurance companies, Allstate and all these places who have food truck insurance specialists. When I was trying to find insurance everyone was like "What are you talking about?" No one knew what I was talking about over here, it was really annoying. That was the hard part... It's so funny to me to see these big events in all of these cities, because when I called them two years ago they had no idea what I was talking about.

Confronting these hurdles and with the initial funds from selling their home in Philadelphia, Joey and Alex were determined to open a gourmet food truck in Orlando. As he explains it, everything was done initially very "piecemeal." They found a truck that was for sale "by some crazy artist guy, [who] was very nice, [and] drove it around as his own personal thing," in the Stardust Coffee and Lounge's, a popular gathering spot in Audobon Park, parking lot for \$3,000. At the time, no one in Orlando had experience with building or preparing gourmet food trucks for use. Thus, they drove to Jacksonville to get it outfitted for commercial use and "wrapped," the industry term for adhering a truck's logo and graphics.

He explains that employees do not do any actual preparation or baking on the Yum Yum Cupcake truck itself. Designed to serve only their pastries, their truck lacks the grills, fryers, and other features that standard on most other trucks. That said, the truck must still meet health code standards. They accomplished this by outfitting the truck with a sink for hand washing, and components such as storage racks and a counter, for selling out of the truck,. According to Joey, the truck's build-out costs were around \$25,000 while the wrap set them back some \$2,000. Along with other unsaid costs, he estimated the final cost was between \$40,000 and \$50,000.

Initially, obtaining information about the required licenses and permits as well as what laws and codes regulating food truck operations was also difficult.

Yeah, it's interesting, I have letters and emails that I wrote to the code department, "We're getting a cupcake truck, what are the rules for downtown?" Because the rules are unclear, no one knew. They were like, "Is it an ice-cream truck?" No one knew what I was talking about. So they just said, "Well, you can't really be in the right of way," "Ok, what's the right of way?" and it's you know, like the parking spaces on 1792 or something. The code department was very unclear, and it was basically, if no one calls and complains, then they really don't do anything.

To legally operate within this part of Central Florida, they eventually found that they would need permits or licenses from the City of Orlando, Orange County, the Department of Agriculture, and the State of Florida. Finally, after obtaining all of the required permits and information, commissary space to bake their cupcakes, and an outfitted truck wrapped in The Yum Yum Cupcake logo, they were ready to sell.

Knowing that The Yum Yum Cupcake food truck was about to launch operations, local blogger Mark Baratelli of *The Daily City*, approached them and other mobile vendors about organizing the Food Truck Bazaar, an event where Central Florida gourmet food trucks could gather and sell their wares. Joey admits that he and others were initially skeptical about working in the same parking lot with each other, as San Francisco and other cities did not have anything similar to this at the time. The event was first held in March, 2011 at Discovery Church, or as Joey describes it, "that hipster church," in Downtown Orlando. While everyone first thought, "who's going to come to this thing," the *Orlando Weekly* and *Orlando Sentinel* along with Mark's blog *The Daily City* spread the word and lead to a response that the trucks were not prepared to handle. In Joey's words "we're talking about thousands of people, we all sold out in

minutes, it was crazy, no one thought that... all of a sudden there was literally like 3,000 people.”

I made the remark that it seemed like Orlando was ready to embrace food trucks then. He responded,

Instantly, although there was a lot of backlash from that first event because the lines were long, we all sold out, none of us could handle the pace, we had no idea! So there was a little backlash at the beginning but yeah, instantly, they definitely embraced The Yum Yum truck.

Since that fateful day, their fame and success grew faster than they could anticipate. Joey immediately started noticing their success through their increase in followers on Facebook and other social media such as Twitter and Instagram. “We have the largest, hands down following probably in the state of FL. [Ever since] we opened our window that night at our first food truck event and from that point on it’s been like lightning speed.” He modestly explains that even though they do work hard and that they do have an amazing product, they owe a lot of their success to the city,

I’m nervous to ever go to another city, because I wonder if we would be embraced the same way, and a lot of people who follow us they remember when it was just Alex and I and they’re cheering for us. You know? Like if you go on our Facebook they’re like “Go you guys!” It’s kind of like we have cheerleaders with our followers, it’s crazy. ...it’s a really cool thing to be a part of, like I said, two years ago there was no Yum Yum truck, there was no food truck industry, and now there’s like thousands of people that line up at the truck every week, to get cupcakes. It’s amazing how you can go from 0 to 60 like that.

To be clear, however, not every local food truck operation experiences the same level of success as The Yum Yum Cupcake. Much of this is a testament to how hard they work and how seriously they take their business. Not only is this both Joey’s and Alex’s full time job, they have hired on four more full time employees and six part time employees. They operate six and sometimes seven days a week; they have their own schedules at various locations such as UCF

and Rollins College, attend most of the local food truck bazaars, and also attend many of the city thrown events and other events such as Tasty Tuesdays. The only real downside about the business, he explains, is how much he has to work. “It’s around the clock. When I worked before, when I was done for the day, I was done. I went home. I don’t do that here.” He is quick to note, however, “I’m not like complaining. It’s unbelievable. Every day I get to come in and be fulfilled with my job, so I’m happy.”



Figure 9: The Yum Yum Cupcake Truck at the UCF Campus

His happiness for the main part comes from being part of a community that he loves and being able to work with his partner Alex.

Yeah, and that’s what I love about it, the community, and that’s why I was saying when you were asking about another city, like, it’s genuine. When I thank a community for letting us come out and serve them, I really mean it. The community part is great. To be embraced by a community, you have to embrace the community. You can’t just take, we give back. If it doesn’t conflict, I tend

not to get into religious groups or political things for donating, but if it's something that's for a good cause, we're doing it. There's a big breast cancer walk in the fall, and we, Alex's mom had breast cancer, and we, um, put together a team. We recruit from our following on Facebook and through our team this year, our Yum Yum team. We raised \$7,000 for the walk. Last year we raised \$4,000. So, in the last 2 years, Yum Yum has raised \$11,000 for breast cancer research, which is real cool. As a business, a real tiny food truck, we're like, over two years [old], we've put \$11,000 into breast cancer research, just from our customers who want to support a cause that's important to us.

Yum Yum is arguably Orlando's most successful gourmet food truck, not just because they were among the first to arrive on the scene, but probably more because of the passion and hard work put forth by Joey and Alex. In many ways, they also epitomize the values that gourmet food trucks seemingly represent. By creating a stylized brand that acts as an extension of themselves, embracing social media, and thoughtfully creating artisanal cupcakes from scratch, they have set the bar for what gourmet food trucks can accomplish in Orlando.

## SwedeDish



Figure 10: Viveca waving to me at the Windermere Event

A fellow anthropology graduate student, Janice, who knew her through her Ikea job suggested that I meet Viveca Averstedt. Before I even introduced myself to Viveca, I already knew that she is from Sweden, still works at Ikea, and that she previously competed in professional Drag racing. I introduced myself to Viveca in March 2013 during a Tasty Tuesday event by telling her I am a friend with Janice and that I am writing my thesis on gourmet food trucks in Orlando. She was very welcoming to me with a bubbly and enthusiastic personality. Within minutes, Viveca told me to hop into the truck so she can introduce me to her husband, Hakan. This is actually my first time to ever step foot on a food truck so I am obviously pleased with Viveca's approachability. Through talking a little more, she learns that I work at White Wolf Café, a restaurant close to her home. We schedule a time to meet there for the interview in

late March 2013. We meet on a Friday during lunch hour so the restaurant is packed around us. Even so, we sit down and order a couple appetizers to nosh as we talk.

Viveca and Hakan both met in high school and have been married for over 20 years. They were both born and lived most of their lives in Sweden until they moved to the U.S. in 1998. Viveca has plenty of memories and stories from Sweden, but the one she is excited about the most to tell me is of her life as a professional drag racer in Sweden. She started drag racing in 1989 and it was her pursuit of the sport that brought her to the U.S. Her husband who used to race as an amateur got Viveca into the sport because he wanted to work on the engines and hot rods themselves. He introduced Viveca to the sport and they created a Husband/Wife team. I asked her if she was nervous getting into the sport and she tells me “No, I’ve always been into crazy things. I’m not afraid of anything.”

Viveca shows me a binder full of newspaper clippings and magazine articles highlighting her drag racing career. Racing for almost ten years in Europe, their team became very successful and they eventually moved to California where the weather allowed them to race year round. They finally left racing and sold their hot rod in 2003 despite a still intense passion for racing. Viveca explains that since sponsorships for racing are harder to obtain for women in the U.S. than they are in Europe, they could no longer afford the costs of racing. Knowing some friends from Sweden who lived in Central Florida, and having vacationed there numerous times, they decided to relocate to Orlando in 2008.



Figure 11: Viveca in European Dragster during her drag racing days.

There is a connection between the drag racing and their decision to start a food truck she explains to me. Even though she was the driver, Viveca would cook all of the food for her crew during events. She also prepared all of the lunches for her sponsors and catered events attended by hundreds. When I ask her why she was the one doing all of the cooking, she tells me that her family has always had a passion for cooking. Her brother owned a restaurant in Stockholm and now manages one of the more famous restaurants there. Taught to cook from her mother, Viveca has no professional training. That said, she does know many traditional Swedish recipes that have been handed down to her through generations. It was through cooking for her team and

sponsors that she honed her cooking and catering skills and came to realize that she had a passion for catering.

The idea to start a food truck came to Viveca in 2011 while she was watching the Food Network and they were highlighting the gourmet food truck scenes in Los Angeles and elsewhere. For her owning a restaurant was “just, for me, too much.” She and Hakan talked about starting a truck and did a lot of research on the subject. She attended many of the local food truck bazaars held in Central Florida. She spoke to other food truck owners as well as Mark Baratelli. She spoke to him about how the events worked and how she could possibly get involved. Viveca emphasized that the biggest obstacle she faced once they finally got started was gaining access to these events. “People just think that they have a food truck and they can just get into them, but you need to, the first thing he [Mark Baratelli] said to me, is you need to have a unique menu and you can’t have a menu that competes with someone else.”

After doing some research, they decided to start looking for a truck. With Hakan’s mechanical knowledge and listening to other food truck owners’ horror stories about broken down trucks, they were very careful in choosing a mechanically sound truck. They eventually find a truck on Craigslist that was previously owned by NASA to house computers. The truck is from 1986 and relatively older than competitor’s trucks, yet it was rarely driven, has its original engine and brakes, and it only had 26,000 miles at the time of purchase. Unlike most other food truck owners who had to hire someone else to retrofit their truck, Hakan was able to completely renovate the vehicle himself. After ordering all of the equipment online, it took him three months, working seven days a week, to have the truck ready for service. Based on my own experience, I can confidently say that the SwedeDish truck is in a league of its own. It is much

wider and longer than most other trucks and the equipment appears efficiently and flawlessly installed.



Figure 12: Hakan runs the grill and installed every appliances within the truck himself  
SwedeDish's grand opening at Eat More Produce in Winter Park on September 2011

remains one of Viveca's favorite events. Being their first time working on a truck, they recruited Viveca's sister and brother to help them. According to her, they experienced various problems on their first day. From most of the gravy spilling out of the fridge on the way to the event, to their cashier taking way too many orders at once, their initial kick off was shaping up to be a disaster. At one point, they even had 40 orders lined up that needed to be cooked and served when a sudden gust of wind blew all the orders to the ground. The tickets were scrambled and

out of order and some people had to wait as long as 50 minutes to receive their food. As she tells the story, everyone remained patient and pleasant throughout the event and the food received high praises.

“It was crazy, but a fun and funny time.” Around the time SwedeDish first started serving, there were not that many events in the Orlando area to sell their dishes. Mark’s Food Truck Bazaars were not as numerous as they are today and Tasty Tuesdays at the time was held on a street that could not accommodate the sizable SwedeDish vehicle. Many of the newer food trucks opening around this time lacked a sufficient means to secure regular business. In November 2011, the Winter Park Food Truck Stop opened and provided a venue for food trucks to rent spaces and operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Sensing a potential opportunity, SwedeDish was the second business to sign up for the truck stop. At the time, renting a space there only cost \$375 per month and they were under contract to operate three times per month. Every Thursday there was live music. The venture was successful for the first few months. Unfortunately, the owner stopped advertising and stopped hiring the live music. As a result, fewer people visited the location, making it less profitable for the truck space renters. The number of trucks slowly dwindled from a high of 25 trucks, down to only five. The Winter Park Food Truck Stop is now closed.

While ultimately unsuccessful, those first few months at the Winter Park Food Truck Stop provided SwedeDish an opportunity to establish both a presence and a following within Orlando’s gourmet food truck scene. After attending more bazaars and eventually allowed to participate in Tasty Tuesdays, SwedeDish was beginning to gain some momentum.

It is important to recognize that operating SwedeDish is not Viveca and Hakan’s only job. Viveca works full time as a kitchen designer at Ikea and Hakan builds and sells custom

motorcycles. As Viveca describes it, Hakan is an extremely creative person and needs to exercise his creativity; something he cannot readily do while working on the food truck.

Because of their other obligations, SwedeDish does not operate as often as trucks whose owners lack part time employment. After working as many as 26 events in 35 days, Viveca and Hakan realized that this kind of schedule was too much to handle if they still wanted to continue with their other pursuits. Now Viveca estimates they work about three events a week.

Besides Tasty Tuesdays, Viveca's favorite event is the Food Truck Bazaar at Fashion Square Mall. I actually got to work there with her one time when Hakan fell ill. I was able to tell she had an established following at the event based on the number of people who came to see her and say hello. I asked her if she had any other notable experiences to share and she tells me about an event she worked with her younger sister, called Zombietoberfest, in October, 2012. Her sister was visiting from Sweden and worked on the truck with Viveca while Hakan stood by to see if they could manage an event without him. Viveca and her sister dressed as zombies just like most of the customers that had gathered to share their appreciation for gore as well as gourmet food. Together they sold some 140 tickets, almost a personal record. Their highest sales ever came from the Fashion Square Food Truck Bazaar where they sold around 150 tickets.



Figure 13: Viveca and her sister at Zombtoberfest in Audobon Park October 2012

Source: SwedeDish Facebook page

Based on experience, there are some events in which she will no longer participate because so few people attend. Such small turnouts, she believes, are due to poor advertising by event coordinators. According to her, the reason Mark's Food Truck Bazaars are so successful is because he effectively utilizes social media. "The Food Truck Bazaar is so unique... Mark from *The Daily City*, he advertises it, he emails people, or Twitter, or Facebook." With the combined social media efforts of *The Daily City*, and participating trucks, details about these bazaars can reach thousands. When she talks about her food truck competitors, she says, "We need each other. None of us do well at an event by yourself. At least five trucks."

Concerning Viveca's personal experience with advertising and using social media, she has a couple friends help her launch SwedeDish's Facebook and Twitter accounts. Eventually her friends could no longer help her, telling Viveca that she would have to continue on her own. "I was freaking out, I was like, 'No, no!' I mean, I don't know what to say... But now, I work hard compared to some other trucks. I try and post something often, I realized there's more response if you have like pictures." While she still enjoys this aspect of her food truck business, she finds that her job at Ikea makes such promotion very time consuming.

Viveca maintains a good relationship with most of Orlando's other food truck owners. She mentions that some of her competitors are not that friendly to newcomers, especially those trucks owned by trained chefs that "seem to have big egos." In contrast to these veterans, newcomers to the scene want to be friendly with everyone. "One of the nicest, nicest people on Earth is Over Rice. He's so... yeah, they are very nice." She says she is closest to Lisa, the owner of the Crepe Company, who she originally met at the Winter Park Food Truck Stop. She describes her and her husband's possible future plans by saying:

It's still a dream, but we are hoping that we are able to, and that is have a second truck where people can lease it, to try the food truck business for a month or two, before they make their decision... There's so many people dreaming of doing this but they can't afford it, or they jump into it and realize that it's costing them too much.

She asks me not to mention any names, but she gives an example of a local truck operator that she thinks got into the business too hastily. She mentions how they use frozen hamburger patties and own a truck that constantly breaks down.

He had his first break down of the truck and he couldn't afford to repair it right away... He was begging his followers to give him money so he could repair, and I'm like, come on. If you have your own business, and you can't afford to have repair on your truck, then you shouldn't be in the business... It makes me upset because it's not good for none of us... When you buy your truck, I mean, it's not

like a restaurant, you're depending on your truck, you need to be able to take it from A to B, compared to a restaurant which is in the same spot.

Because of their history in drag racing and Hakan's mechanical expertise, I can tell that they place a heavy emphasis on the importance of the truck itself. While other food truck owners may see their vehicles as only a means to an end, Viveca and Hakan view their truck more as a representation of their business. Accordingly, all of its components must be in excellent working condition. Unlike the gas run generators of many other trucks, which can actually drown out conversations, the propane generator of the SwedeDish truck only produces a constant low-level hum. Viveca mentions how in California, gas run generators are not allowed, wishing similar regulations were enforced here in Florida. The noise emanating from other trucks can be so bothersome that at times Viveca has even relocated to new spot during or before a food truck event.

We discuss the various costs associated with operating a gourmet food truck. She tells me about the numerous local events that charge owners for the right to participate. The RDV Sportsplex charges \$100, which she considers steep, although some of it goes to charity. The organizers of Tasty Tuesdays, in comparison, only charge \$35, while the bazaars run by Mark require a flat \$75 fee regardless of the location and potential turnout. She guesses that the highest recurring cost not related to food, is the insurance, which runs about \$2,600 per year. Another operating cost is the business license, which must be renewed each year for \$350. Although SwedeDish does turn a profit, Viveca explains that it could be much higher if she were not so adamant about purchasing high quality ingredients. "For example, the cheese in the burger, I could use a less, less expensive, but I go with the most expensive, sharp cheddar cheese, because of the taste. I'm so picky myself, I can't make any shortcuts."

According to Viveca, it is the food that makes a food truck gourmet. The food must always be made from scratch and with great care. Coincidentally, the prep work for making such tasty and well prepared food is also the hardest part in her eyes, especially the meatballs. She keeps very detailed records and through trial and error, they have developed an accurate formula for determining how much of each item they will need at any given event. Through her records, she and her sister have discovered that for their first year, Viveca made a total of 17,230 meatballs and Hakan peeled 6,100 lbs. of potatoes.

Viveca admits that her favorite part of owning and running a food truck is probably “meeting all the people. It reminds me of the racing, because I had so many fans when I did the racing.” Viveca exudes energy and has a deep passion for life. She even wishes that her truck, wrapped in the design and colors of the Swedish flag, was more colorful and vibrant. “I just want more, I don’t know, that’s just my personality...” While the truck is simple and elegant, highlighting the cuisine’s origins, Viveca still would like it to reflect more of her personality by including additional colors and energy.

She describes the different types of people that attend local food truck events as “Very very mixed. For example, at Fashion Square, its more people at your age... the event we are going to have tonight in DeBary, that’s more people fiftyish. So, it’s very very mixed. It depends on what the occasion is... Ocoee, Friday nights, that’s families, again, it depends on where we are.” We talk a little bit about the regulars they have gained and she mentions one in particular; “I have one regular, an Asian guy, every time we are at Tasty Tuesday he comes, and it takes him 35, 40 minutes, because he lives far... just because he is craving for the burger.”

Through working and speaking with Viveca, I can attest that it is the customers’ love for their food that puts a smile on her face. She is proud of her Swedish heritage and SwedeDish’s

menu is clearly inspired by their homeland. Each item is named after a Norse God and has Viveca's own flair on her mother's traditional Swedish recipes. Though the couple may have left drag racing, Viveca and Hakan still have a very successful Husband/Wife team. They may not be racing at a hundred miles an hour, but they are serving out gourmet food almost as fast.

### Over Rice



Figure 14: Over Rice Food Truck, from their Facebook

Source: Over Rice Facebook page

I initially approached Joel, the owner of Over Rice, because I loved his truck's artistic design almost as much as the food on his menu. It did not hurt that Viveca from SwedeDish also

spoke very positively of him. As with many of the successful gourmet food trucks in Orlando, his Filipino/Hawaiian fusion cuisine is both unique and eclectic. I introduced myself to him during a Tasty Tuesday event in May 2013, and explained my research objectives to him. He responded affirmatively in a casual but enthusiastic fashion that made me feel immediately at ease and friendly. Being born in the Philippines, living for a while in California and Hawaii, and then coming to Orlando, I obtained the impression that he was both serious about his business and that he had something of a carefree attitude towards life.

We arranged for me to interview him at the Audobon Park Farmer's Market after his business slowed down. I arrived around 9:00pm on June 11, 2013 and noticed he still had a couple people at his tent. I said hello and walked around while he was finishing with his customers. Once he was ready, I set up the tape recorder, we toasted beers, and began speaking as naturally as old friends.

Looking much younger, Joel is surprisingly only 42 years old, which he explains is due to his "Filipino blood." He was born in Cebu, a province in the Philippines and moved to Sacramento, California at a year old. There he obtained his degree in Communications in 1996 at the University of Sacramento. Not knowing what he was going to do for a career, he got a one-way flight to Maui where he eventually found employment in management at the surf company Quicksilver. He worked there for a decade, calling it "the best ten years of [his] life." He met a tourist-girl in Hawaii from Orlando and being unhappy with the corporate direction Quicksilver was heading at the time, he decided to "just go for it" and moved to Orlando in 2005. They were married in 2007 and divorced four years later.

Joel explained that after the divorce he wanted to find something about which he was passionate. "I felt like I was in a jungle and I wanted to survive," he explained to me. "I didn't

want to work for anyone else and I wanted to try and be my own boss, and the first thing that came up to me, you know, is that I want to cook.” Although he mentioned that he has had no professional training, cooking has always been a part of his life. “I always cooked. My Dad always cooked, and a lot of guys in the Filipino culture, and women, cooked a lot. I was just always around it.” Around this time the Orlando food truck scene was just coming into its own and he noticed no one was doing the type of cuisine he knew best; “Hawaiian plate lunches, pork and chicken adobo, pancit, lumpia, in Orlando.” In February 2012, he decided he was going to start building a food truck, and in the meantime “try to get into the best farmers markets in Orlando.”

He established a presence and following for himself at various farmer’s markets throughout Central Florida including Winter Garden, Lake Eola, and Audobon Park. While he was serving food at the farmer’s markets, he bought the truck and the parts to outfit it. He then started working with a food truck contractor to get it ready for use. He bought the truck, started working on it in March 2012, and finished it in September 2012. He reminisces over how he first came to purchase the truck in Boca Raton, “an ’84 Grumman Olson, old Electrical truck; the guy used to transport his dirt bikes to Tampa, \$2,800, 56,000 original miles” he described. Finding a nice truck, with so few miles and for a decent price is a rare find and he feels as if he got a lucky break, as if someone was looking out for him. The cost to outfit the truck was \$27,000 and all of the parts were about \$5,000 to \$10,000. He estimates the total cost of the truck was between \$35,000 and \$40,000.

In terms of securing the licenses and obtaining the information necessary to launch a legitimate food truck business, Joel explained that he found out the majority of what he had to do online. Not wanting to rely on anyone else, and because he did not receive clear information

when he contacted the state and county offices, he learned primarily through the Internet about what steps had to be taken in order to legally operate. When it came to the design on the truck, Joel had an interesting story that differs from most of the food trucks on the scene. Thinking he would just wrap it like everyone else, his girlfriend at the time suggested a local artist that she knew to paint the truck. He googled the artist and “decided right then” that that was the person he wanted to design and paint the logo for the truck. “I got a local artist and I’m so glad I did. Everyone’s wrapping trucks, which is great, but I wanted to do something different, people want something different, you know?”

The process ultimately took some time, but from the way he spoke about the experience, I could tell not only how much it meant to him to get the truck perfect but also how much pride he has in how it has ultimately turned out. Still being painted, Over Rice finally started serving out of the truck in September 2012. “There are a couple things I would have changed. I wish I had bought a bigger truck, a wider truck, a little bit more fresh water... maybe raised the window up a little bit and make it longer, more prep space, but other than that, for the first time not really know what I’m doing, it turned out great.”

His first event was at a farmer’s market in Avalon Park where he admittedly was over eager and prepared way too much food. “We did pretty well for the first time, but ever since then, it’s been a total learning experience, 100%, and we’re still learning.” Since that first farmer’s market they have slowly and steadily obtained a following. Once their truck was finally ready they began participating in as many food truck events as possible. He described to me that now “On a typical week, with farmers markets out of a tent, and on a food truck, we do Saturday, Sunday, Monday out of the tent, and then Tuesday and Friday with the food truck and sometimes we double book Saturday and Sunday and do both.” His average food truck itinerary includes

Tasty Tuesdays, the RDV Sportsplex on Fridays, and whichever Food Truck Bazaars Mike Baratelli invites them to on Saturdays and Sundays.

A typical month for Over Rice will have them working 22 to 26 events. According to him, it is the double Saturdays and double Sundays that are the most grueling for him. “My brother and I, Parish, do it together, we do all the shopping, cooking, cleaning, paperwork, and it’s a struggle, but I don’t complain because I’d rather do this. If I’m going to work hard, I want to do it for myself.” His future plans include hiring more employees. He needs more truck workers for prep work as the volume of chickens and other ingredients that need to be prepped to his standards are considerable. The way he describes his philosophy is that:

Every time I eat out, I’m kind of disappointed at certain times. Like, I don’t want all the avocado on this side, so when I make food, I want to make food that I would like to eat. My Dad’s like “Oh, you don’t have to chop off that fat,” well, yeah I do! Because I wouldn’t want to eat that, you know? So I’ll just manicure it and manicure it and make it like I would want to eat it. There’s no other way, otherwise I wouldn’t be doing this.

Most of their produce they obtain from the farmers markets in which they work; their meat they get from restaurant depot because they buy 100’s of pounds of pork and chicken Joel explains. “We would go broke if we bought local or organic or anything like that, and we don’t claim ‘gourmet,’ and I want to give something good at a decent price. If you do that local, organic way, it’s expensive. The produce is great from farmers markets.”

Joel describes a typical event for them off the top of his head in great detail:

Last night we went to Fashion Square Mall, which is the biggest food truck event that we’ve been to and we brought, um, 5 bags of Lumpia, which had 30 pieces in each bag. We brought 12 cups of rice, but we cooked another, uh this is dry, we cooked 12 cups of dry rice which yields more than that, and then we made rice in the truck. We made another three cups of dry rice and then we made another three cups of dry rice. We brought 18lbs of pork adobo and also about two and a half pounds of onions and green bell peppers to top it with. So over 20lbs of that. Then, we brought Kahlua Pig, which is about 20lbs.... we went through about two

cases of \_\_\_\_ which there's about 30 in each case. Hawaiian drinks, which we went through about three cases. There's 24 in each case... We have production sheets, what we're going to take, what we came back with, and gross sales, food costs, but that's the hard part for me. I don't like that stuff...

During the interview he points out Mark Baratelli (The person who sets up the event Joel just described), "Oh hey, that's Mark Baratelli right now; we're going to bring him over here for part two. That's the guy who started... we have a really good relationship with this guy, that's the guy you have to talk to, he's pretty cool, yeah. He's not the only guy who brought food trucks to Orlando, but he has a really cool thing, man." Relaying some information he heard earlier from Mark, he tells me that Mark works with over 50 food trucks and that there are about 100 trucks in Orlando. He shares his thoughts on the number of trucks by saying:

So everyone's like, "Ohhh yeah, I'm going to open up a truck," which is great, but, I think with food trucks, you need to have something that people are going to keep coming back to... Like in the jungle, the stronger are going to survive, if you have the will and you want to do it...

I jokingly asked if he would be upset if another Filipino/Hawaiian food truck showed up on the scene and he laughed, "No, I would just hope that we're better. Because you can't hate on that, if they think they can do it, then let's go for it man." His response highlights an issue with food trucks. With more and more gourmet food trucks arriving on the scene it is becoming more difficult to introduce cuisine that is still unique yet accessible to the public. Many times with trucks serving duplicate types of items it does become a competition between who serves the better version and who serves more often. While it is arguable that the food truck community in Orlando is more cooperative than other cities, as is evident through the numerous bazaars and event centric atmosphere of Orlando's food trucks, the nature of the business is nonetheless competitive and a truck's success is highly dependent on the amount of effort put into it.

I asked Joel if he has a good relationship with the other food truck owners, he answered by saying:

Yeah man, I'm like drama free zone. I hear "Blah blah blah, blah blah blah," I'm like... I'm like this (He puts his hands to the sides of his eyes like he is blocking his peripheral vision) I'm here to work, and I'm not snobby or anything, but I don't want to get involved in that.

I relayed to him how Viveca had only good things to say about him and he responds "Yeah we love Viveca, yeah, they're great. There's a few handful of people in the truck [industry] that we've met, that are real cool, but I'll never place judgment on anybody, they're doing their thing, and that's cool."

According to Joel, for some food truck owners, operating a food truck is only a part time job and then they have a full-time job on top of that. For Joel, Over Rice is his job and he eventually got his brother Parish to join as well, where he left his "nine to five." Joel's response to how he feels about his decision is, "I love it. Don't regret it at all and it's just started." The root of the love for his job appears to stem from the people he gets to serve and meet. Speaking about his customers, Joey says, "Love them, and love them. Yeah, I just want to radiate love and aloha, ya know? Just share the love, man. That's it man." He gets a wide variety of customers as he explains:

We get all walks of life, man. We try and do vegan dishes here, vegetarian dishes here, because there's a lot of vegetarians here, but people love meat, ya know? But yeah, we've had young, old, married, kids; kids love the chicken... all walks of life. From lawyers to doctors to people off the streets to anybody, it's just simple, yummy fresh food that I think that a lot of people around the world can eat.

It became apparent that pleasing the customer and people in general is his main motivation. Joel says, "The people that I've met, and, like you! Helping you do this, I'm like, man, and it makes my day. When someone says, 'man, that was so good,' that totally makes me, so..." Joel sees

this as one of the more rewarding aspects of operating a gourmet food truck. “I’d rather be doing something this rewarding than something and making twice as much money.”

I asked him what his experience is like with social media; he groaned and said:

Man, I’m the worst with Facebook, I’m really bad at it... My brother, and, actually his wife, is our social media girl, she does it a lot. Ever since Facebook came out it was never really a thing for me. I know it would benefit me to do it, if I was on that, doing it all the time, but I have so much to do with my brother and I, and all the stops that we have, and then just having my life, it’s tough man, it’s challenging.... But if I got into it more, it could only help.

Joel reminisced about how he remembers “roach coach” food trucks being around since he was a kid describing them as “little silver, aluminum vans.” Speaking of how gourmet trucks are different, he says, “...but now yeah, it’s definitely another way to eat, it brings families out and you sit around and there’s twenty different types of food to choose from.” He prefers serving inside a tent at a farmers market than inside his truck however.

The difference between the markets, when you’re out of a tent, and a food truck, is when you’re behind that wall of the food truck, you’re just basically dishing out plates... when you’re in a tent you’re like cool, I’ll step away from the tent and talk stories and meet people, you know? So you aren’t really confined... At a market you can kind of socialize a little more, which I love to do.

Joel is the only food truck owner I know that works at farmers markets as well as on their vehicle. From observing him at this particular farmer’s market in Audobon Park and the amount of times friends and family approach him, I can observe why he prefers this atmosphere. Throughout the interview, I meet his daughter, nephew, mother, father, brother, and an owner of another tent who sells sweets. He always introduces me and describes how cool my research is to others as he chats with them, before continuing the interview. His is extremely personable and you get the feeling that he is genuinely interested in the lives of his customers and friends.

Looking towards the future, Joel thinks about a time when he will:

Have a team that I can trust and can believe in, and they see the same vision that I'm doing, and maybe someday have a café where my friends can come in, build like an oasis, where they can come in, grab a beer, water, juice, or whatever it is, a bite to eat. And we're not like out here, obviously we want to make money, but I'm not out here to just take your money and say "See ya later" kind of thing. I want to build relationships and make it more of an experience, so when Zach's driving by he's like "Yo! I'm going to go see Joel", whether you buy food or not, that's ok, just come say hi. I just want to build some kind of place where people can come hang out and be comfortable, because in Filipino culture, Hawaiian culture, Polynesian culture, it's all about friends and family and just embracing that... For us it's like an experience, come up and say hi, Parish and Joel, two Filipino guys, and we hope you enjoy your meal.

Joel has a very carefree and loving attitude towards life. Aloha, which stands for peace, love, hello, and goodbye are constant aspects of how he lives. Easy going and friendly, Joel's goal is to meet new people and enjoy new experiences. For him there is no better way to do this than through the love of food. By embracing friendship and family, Joel is currently doing what he believes brings people closer together, good food, made with good intentions. With a truck and cuisine that personifies Joel's upbringing and attitude, it comes as very little surprise that people gravitate to him, as well as the food he serves.

## Dixieland Diner



Figure 15: Tim looking out during the Avalon Park Food Truck Bazaar

I first met Steve through Viveca while I was working for SwedeDish at a food truck event in Windermere in May 2013. My first impression of Steve was that he was friendly and I found our introduction as an opportunity to present my research objectives to him. He was receptive and he wrote down his email address so that I could contact him later. By the time we actually conducted an interview I had already worked with Steve and Tim at a couple of food truck events; an event at Celebration and one in Apopka, both in June 2013. Through working with them and our online correspondence, I had developed a cursory impression of their personalities as well as their relationship with each other and their customers. Steve and Tim, both being from

the South, exude Southern hospitality and charm to a key. They have worked together for more than 20 years and, by all appearances, their friendship and business relationship is integral to their success.

Steve and Tim suggested we meet at Royal Thai to conduct the interview and have some lunch before they had to visit Restaurant Depot to purchase the provisions for their next mobile food event. We met at 12pm on July 23, 2013. We all overlooked the menu, discussing how much we enjoy Thai cuisine and Steve and Tim ordered an appetizer for the table. Steve and I ordered the Pad Thai while Tim went with the Red Curry. We discussed our previous favorite restaurants and food in general. One topic of interest that has always been apparent when talking to anyone in the mobile food vending community is just how much everyone enjoys food. Throughout the interview we discussed the food and tried each other's different dishes. Through talking with Steve and Tim I felt very welcomed and I can sense the camaraderie in their friendship and the warmth that seems to be inherent in many Southerners. We joked and laughed a lot; sometimes they teased each other with the familiarity of only people who have known each other for so long can do.

Steve and Tim met in their home state of Alabama almost 27 years ago while working at a restaurant before moving to Orlando in 1988. Steve had just gotten out of the Navy in 1987 where he cooked. While careful to mention that cooking in the Navy was by no means fine dining, Steve says it is where he became experienced in preparing meals for large groups of people. Since being hired at the restaurant, Steve and Tim have worked together in the food and hospitality industry ever since. From serving, to bartending, to managing, they have held a long line of jobs that focus on food and satisfying the customer. Just before starting their own food truck, Steve and Tim managed Subway restaurants from 2004 through 2011. During this time,

they actually managed a few different Subway locations where they set restaurant sales records and developed a consumer following that persists to this day. Steve spoke about how

We took a \$19,000 store a week, up to, I mean as high as \$50,000... So we saved a lot of money in those times and when it came time to leave, when I was over Subway, I took some time off, and I wasn't sure what I was going to do...Initially I was just taking off three months, and then we decided to get a food truck in January of 2012.

The inspiration to start a food truck was born from watching a Food Network program called *Eat Street* that features a weekly segment on food trucks. Not long after watching the program, Steve was "sitting on the porch one evening, and said to Tim, 'What about a food truck?' and it went from there."

Steve says one of the largest factors in deciding on a food truck was that

The fear of going back to work for Corporate America was steering me towards something... Once we decided that it might be a good idea, I think it sounded exciting. We always said, we'd love to have our own restaurant, so that was the driving force, wanting to have your own restaurant, and not being able to afford a real restaurant, and doing one mobile was becoming a bigger trend in Orlando and everywhere else, so we weren't that afraid to try it out, and a year later, we're very glad we did.

After making the decision to enter into the food truck business, they had to figure out what type of cuisine they would serve and where they would get and build their truck. Every food truck owner has a similar story to tell about how they purchased their trucks and the person they eventually hired to retrofit these vehicles. Steve and Tim's experience was less than favorable. According to them, the company they hired ended up not being completely qualified in what they were doing. They had the truck outfitted at A1 Commissary in Jacksonville, which they admittedly wish they had learned more about before commissioning the firm for the job. The truck they bought was a Utilimaster Step Van, in which they placed a down payment on for \$12,000 in January 2012.

From there they “found out the type of guy he really was.” As Tim portrays their situation, “He threw out the bait, and we bit.” The total cost was \$36,000, which included the truck and the build-out. It was not until after it was completed and paid for that they discovered they would need a new engine, new brakes, and that the tires would need replaced. Originally quoted that the process would take two months, it soon stretched into four. While they waited for their truck to be completed, they worked on figuring out what they were going to serve.

During the time of the truck’s retrofitting, Steve and Tim attended various food truck events to get a feel for these operations and the varieties of food being served. They chose southern food for the reasons that they are both from the South, they do not have any professional training, and “southern food is made with a lot of love, it’s something that’s more home style than it is epicurean, and we do fit into that niche real good.”

Steve believes that many trucks corner themselves by focusing on too particular of a cuisine such as the “Crepe Company that does crepes. You aren’t going to see them doing a lot of other stuff.” A lot of Dixieland Diner’s versatility comes from the many varieties of southern cuisine that exist. While Dixieland focuses more on New Orleans-style Cajun cuisine, they still have the flexibility to experiment with other dishes as well. They have tested various dishes on friends and family and initially everything was trial and error. The first items they decided to serve were their Boudin Fritters and the Fish and Grits. Concerning their menu in general, Steve says, “Instead of being just street food, I wanted to bring some entrée food, items you could get at a real restaurant.”

I asked them why they decided on the name Dixieland Diner and how they chose the design for their truck.

Steve - The name was tough.

Tim – (Laughing) Yeah, why did we choose Dixieland Diner?

S - We wanted, we wanted something that said Southern, and it was just trial and error with coming up with different names, I can't even remember some of the names.

T - Some of my names were like 'The Front Porch' or something like that

S - I do remember one, we thought of something like 'Slap your Granny,' or 'Slap your Mama...' Food so good, you could slap your granny.

When it came to designing their food truck's wrap, Tim explained that they both like jazz and that they found an album cover they liked for a band called Dixieland Jazz. They had initially considered featuring jazz musician silhouettes or New Orleans street scenes. The artist they eventually commissioned to create the truck's wrap incorporated their ideas along with the old album cover. Tim recounted about how he fell in love with the final artwork. "So the steamboat you see, and the trees and the water, the steamboat with the notes coming out of the smoke stack, was really on an old jazz album cover from 1989 I think." I joked and asked if they thought anyone was ever going to come up and recognize it. Steve says, "I was worried at the beginning, I really was." Tim believes they changed the original design enough although that they will not have to worry about any disgruntled jazz musicians arriving at their doorstep suing for copyright infringement. Steve expressed that "I don't think it's very innovative by any stretch of the imagination, but I really just wanted to be old fashioned."

The truck does exude a Louisiana vibe. Wrapped in vibrant green and classy old-school imagery, it readily evokes the kind of cuisine they serve. Despite the initial problems they had getting the truck operational; Steve and Tim had a relatively less difficult time starting getting started. Steve tells me how it was easy to draft a business plan and to obtain the necessary licenses. According to him, the hard part was tapping into their savings and putting the money down "for getting a truck built and then actually making it work, so the beginning was very scary."

Like SwedeDish and several other trucks on the scene, Dixieland Diner's first place of business was the aforementioned Winter Park Food Truck Stop, located in a local parking lot. Run by Dan Bellows, The Winter Park Food Truck rented out spaces to various food truck owners for around \$450 a month when Steve and Tim signed up. Renters could then pretty much stay operational all week at any hour. Steve and Tim's grand opening took place in late June 28 2012. While sales were initially decent on most Thursdays, every other day saw little or no profits. Tim recalls how "we opened up for a lunch there one day and sold one item." They were at this location for three or four months before they realized how little business they were getting and, thus, subsequently relocated.

It seems that one of the main factors for achieving success in the local mobile vending scene is gaining acceptance into Mark Baratelli's ongoing series of food truck bazaars. Tim explains that it took a while for them to start serving at these events. I have gathered from my interviews that these are some of the most profitable events for food truck owner/operators. Mark has to first sample the food himself before deciding if the truck clashes with any other event participants. He also has to determine if potential participants are reliable and will show up. Based on what I read between the lines of Steve and Tim's comments, Mark may have to like and get along with applicants as well. Mark's success and standing in the food truck community is evident through the way Steve describes some of his dealings with him:

One afternoon I got a phone call. I picked it up and he said, 'Hi, this is Mark Baratelli of the Food Truck Bazaar, we have an event in Melbourne,' and it was the first Melbourne event, 'and I need another truck or two to go.' I was like (he makes a shocked face), and my heart was like, (he makes a gesture as if his heart was pounding).

Tim laughs, "You should have seen him, he was giddy as a school girl."

I ran outside so I could get better reception and I said ‘Mark, I can’t believe this, I’ve waited for you to call, I’ve wanted you to call, but I have an event that night in Clermont’ and I said ‘I can’t do it.’ I said I can’t cancel an event because I don’t want to make that a practice or that impression. And then I got back in touch with him, I sent him an email saying ‘Mark you called me last month wondering if I could do an event, and I was wondering if we could still, you know, get into an event.

Mark responded to Steve by explaining the way they now sign on trucks to events. The truck brings their food items over to his office, they sample them, and then they will get back to them with their decision.

So I was like, I thought I was in, but now I have to go audition. So we did that. Then one night after Tasty Tuesdays, because I remember another owner saying “Are you in with Mark?” and I (grumbling) said “No, not yet...” and then I got home and got an email saying “Congratulations! You’re in the Food Truck Bazaar.” But yeah, in the beginning we would only get one or two food truck events... The highlight of the year was Mark getting in touch, because they have the best trucks, in Orlando, for the most part, they draw the biggest crowds, they have the best reputation, they have the most events... So that is what saved us. We wouldn’t be in the position we are at now if we had never gotten into the Bazaar, I can say that whole-heartedly.

Mark Baratelli and his Food Truck Bazaars are a common theme in Orlando’s mobile vending scene. It is probably safe to say that without these events, Orlando’s gourmet food trucks would never have reached their current success and popularity. I mentioned to Steve and Tim how Orlando seems to be much more event centric than other cities. Steve responded with his own insight, that:

In some cities you can just park in a parking lot, but those are usually the big metropolises... A lot of food truck owners [in other cities], I would assume, unless they meet up at a commissary, or a common park, where they park overnight, aren’t always going to be in contact with each other. In Orlando, we all know each other, for the most part, it’s different. You see that. In the big cities I would imagine it’s not like that. And it’s cool to have community events, where you have the whole community hold an event, that’s a plus that I don’t think the big cities have at all. Like in New York, one truck parks on the side of a street, a line forms on the sidewalk.

When speaking about their favorite event, they both laughed and Steve joked “The one that makes the most money.” Steve considered it a little more before saying, “That’s a good question, we were happy to be in Tasty Tuesday, I like Tasty Tuesday, it’s not always the most money, but I’ve done well there, very well.” Going into further detail about Orlando’s food truck community, Steve and Tim describe the behind the scenes, political factions that emerge when determining which trucks work at which events. “You know what, Bonnie and Jimmie, they do, they have the... they’re the Anti-Mark. They’re the trucks, for the most part, they started because Mark wouldn’t let them into their events. They had some sort of falling out in the beginning.” Bonnie and Jimmie, along with the owners of Kona Dog, are the ones that launched a food truck event in nearby Celebration, Florida. This was the first event that I worked with Steve and Tim. They also have ties with the city of Windermere and its local food truck event. “So those are the two best events that Mark doesn’t have. He wishes he had those two.” These were the first gourmet food truck events in which Dixieland participated. Although Steve and Tim are still happy to work with Mark, they are also thankful that Bonnie and Jimmie gave them an opportunity to work when no one else really would.

There is also an issue of exclusivity among some of Orlando’s more veteran gourmet truck owner/operators. Steve tells the story of one particular food truck veteran from whom they would frequently order food and give compliments, only to later be snubbed by. Yet, instead of giving up, they remained amiable and personable, until one day at an event in Kissimmee:

One of the owners came over, and he tried our Boudin, and Fish and Grits, and when he was in line, I was like, I was excited, “Tim, do you see this?” I’m very proud, that one of the most prominent food trucks in Orlando is in our line, and then he said not too long ago that we have great Boudin... It’s a matter of winning them over...

Similar to the other food truck owner/operators that I have interviewed, Steve and Tim describe the consumers who frequent mobile vending events as “a mixed bag.” Yet, Steve particularly enjoys one group:

The one crowd that I like that come, are the people that know the food, that have been to New Orleans, that have been through the South, that are excited to see Shrimp and Grits. I love to see someone walk by the menu and go “(Gasp!) They have Shrimp and Grits!” Or beignets, or even Boudin. The guys mostly like Boudin.

I recalled a particular incidence from the Apopka food truck event where I worked with Steve and Tim. A fellow that approached the truck told us that said he had lived in New Orleans for about 20 years and that he would be the judge of whether Steve and Tim’s Boudin was genuine or not. Always aiming to please and confident in their food, Steve and Tim told the customer, “Hey, try them out, if you don’t like it we’ll refund your money.” With a mouth full of Boudin, the man nodded and pounded Steve and Tim’s fists before adding a couple dollars to the tip jar. Reminiscing about this scene, Tim said, “Those are the favorite customers. They walk by, they say ‘Oh, I’m from New Orleans,’ or Louisiana, ‘and I want to try your Boudin to see if it compares,’ then they have it and they say ‘(whistles appreciatively) spot on!’ Even the beignets, like Steve said, people freak out when they see the beignets. We’ve never had a complaint.”



Figure 16: Dixieland Diner's Shrimp and Grits with Andouille sausage and spinach

Tim believes that their menu has been received well, admitting that their Southern charm and hospitality probably plays a role in their success. This is something that I noticed about them as they deal with customers. “That’s the biggest thing, that’s how you keep your customers coming back,” Tim explained. Their food and hospitality experience and the way they treat customers is a strength that they hope helps them in this competitive business. According to Steve, “Anything you can do, to go above and beyond is what it takes... Once we got in, hopefully our personality, would be, whatever it may be, help the business, and get people to come back. Plus, if you can get them to like you, they’re less likely to complain.” They both laughed at this insight. Tim, in particular, has a talent of remembering people’s names. This is something that I noticed when working with him at various food truck events. If anything, this is

a skill that definitely surprised customers, making them feel genuinely appreciated for their business.

Steve and Tim's experience in the hospitality industry helped them develop important business skills such as keeping track of expenditures, profits, and food costs. These abilities are essential in running a successful gourmet food truck. "Food trucks are a pretty simple operation. It requires a sort of fastidiousness in keeping your numbers straight, making sure you're making profit, but it's not like, unless you have a lot of employees and things like that, it can be a very simple thing." While admitting that they do not expect to get rich in mobile food vending, they do see it as a rewarding way to pay the bills. They live out in the country in what Tim describes as a mobile home on 25 acres of land. With very little overhead costs, they are satisfied with how their business has developed over time.

According to Steve and Tim, the best part of operating a food truck "is the people, the interaction, and the feedback. That three hours or four hours of usually, hypersonic [activity], is the best part, with no doubt... My favorite part is opening the windows and serving. Everything else is a lot of work." Tim noted how keeping track of customer feedback on their Facebook profile is the most rewarding aspect for him. "It's looking on Facebook and seeing people, you know, the comments that they say about the food, 'some of the best they've ever had,' you know, 'the watermelon tomato salad was phenomenal,' stuff like that."

Steve described social media as "A tool, you know, to get word out of where you are. It's a great way to say where you're going to be and say thank you afterward. If you were even better at it, you can even off specials through Facebook or Twitter. I've seen some trucks even do, like, come up and mention this, or say this, and get some sort of freebie." Tim jokes that he is not allowed to post. "I can post under Dixieland's Facebook page, but I can't post under

Dixieland Diner. I have to post under my own... You know, he does all the social media, I change the oil in the truck, clean it, you know, I do all the grunt work, he does all the social work.”

In terms of future plans, both Steve and Tim imagine a time when they can afford their own standalone restaurant. For now, they explain that they have always been “uncautious,” and “living by the seat of their pants.” Not so worried about thoughts of what is next, Steve and Tim appear happy with their current standing within Orlando’s gourmet food truck community. Through experience, heart, patience, and their trademark Southern charm, Dixieland Diner has succeeded where many others may have not. True to their gourmet food truck’s individuality, Dixieland Diner’s cuisine reflects the owners’ personalities. I can almost feel Steve’s and Tim’s warmth and personality in each Dixieland dish that I sample.

#### Case Study Conclusion

Based on the vendor profiles presented in this chapter, it seems all but evident that all of the gourmet food truck owner/operators that I interviewed emphasize what they believe is important. Joey and Alex of Yum Yum place greater emphasis on working with and embracing the local Orlando community. Viveca and Hakan of SwedeDish prioritize operating a well-run truck and being prepared for potential mechanical issues that may adversely affect their operations. Joel of Over Rice in his carefree way only wants to get along with everyone he meets and serve amazing food that anyone can enjoy. Steve and Tim of Dixieland believe that their operations should evoke notions of Southern hospitality and charm.

While they all share some of these aspects, some are greater points than others to each individual. It is by excelling at these factors that make them all so successful. While they may all have different motives for entering into Orlando’s gourmet food truck scene as well as

different business models, they all exhibit the qualities that identify a food truck as being gourmet. In the next subsection I will detail the findings I gathered through personally working with some of these owner/operators, as well as participating in and observing the events each of these owners and others in Orlando have worked.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DRIVE ALONGS AND OBSERVATIONS

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I describe the differences and similarities of various local gourmet food truck events that I attended over the past year. I not only document the ways in which mobile restaurant vendors interact with each other and their customers, I also describe how customers interact with food truck owner/operators and counter staff including myself. Finally, I provide details about my own experience while working at various events within Orlando's gourmet food truck scene.

In total, I worked seven local gourmet food truck events while conducting my thesis research. While not all of them were technically in Orlando proper, each was held within the greater Central Florida area and, thus, can be considered as part of the local food truck scene. I first assisted Viveca at the RDV Sportsplex in May 2013. I worked with her again soon thereafter one Sunday at the Fashion Square Mall Food Truck Bazaar. The last event where I helped Viveca and Hakan was about a week later at one of the area's busiest events, the Family Food Truck Night in Windermere, held every fourth Friday of the month. Coincidentally, it was at this Family Food Truck Night where I met Steve from Dixieland Diner. I worked four events with Steve and his business partner Tim. The first event was Food Truck Friday at Celebration in June 2013. After this, I worked with them at the Apopka Food Truck Round Up in July 2013, followed by the Family Food Truck Friday in Windermere and the Avalon Park Food Truck Bazaar over subsequent weeks.

Working and participating in these events was not only vital to developing a greater appreciation of local food truck owner/operators, it was also integral in understanding the customers who frequent Orlando's food trucks. Taken as a whole, this type of participant-

observation helped me to better grasp how Orlando's food truck scene works as a whole. While no two food truck events were exactly the same, they did share many similarities and common themes.

### **Community: Different Neighborhoods, Different People**

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of Orlando's various food truck events is the different neighborhoods and populations that organizers target. As Joey of The Yum Yum Cupcake Truck notes in my interview:

We don't have a walkable city, but I think we have a real cool city, we have these real neat neighborhoods that have sprung up, like Ivanhoe Village and Audobon Park... Yeah, but it's cool, and they have beautiful residential area neighborhoods, and I think that's made a real good city for food trucks. People like to live and sustain in their neighborhood, so you bring the food truck to them once a week, once a month, and then you go to the next place.

Through participating at several local events, I got the chance to visit different cities and neighborhoods in which these events were held. As described by the owners that I interviewed, Orlando's food truck scene is comprised of a wide array of people from various socio-economic backgrounds. In the following subsections, I will describe the common themes I was able to identify as well as the differences between events.

#### Similarities

By both working and attending gourmet food truck events in greater Orlando, I noticed a number of similarities that characterized both mobile food vendors and their clientele. When considered altogether, these insights help better define the local gourmet food truck experience. By listing the required operations and events from the perspectives of both owner/operators and food truck customers, I elucidate how these local gourmet food truck events differentiate themselves from more traditional eateries.

Food truck owner/operators are required to arrive at events at least an hour before their scheduled starts. Such early arrivals give them enough time to set up their trucks in the provided spaces and finish last minute prep work. At most events, drivers of a wide array of vehicles including RVs, trucks, trailers, and pick-ups configure their vehicles in a way that is readily accessible to customers. Generators are started and stoves lit, as all of the necessary utensils are removed from their secure storage areas and laid out for service. Both SwedeDish and Dixieland Diner typically have dishes such as mashed potatoes and grits warming on the stove before the arrival of diners. In most cases, customers are already lined up outside of the truck windows waiting to place their orders.

Increasingly immersed in Central Florida's food truck scene, it soon became apparent that many of those attending these local gatherings were not just there for the food. I rarely noticed anyone attending the events alone as most attendees would arrive in couples or groups. Oftentimes, groups would bring their own chairs, tables, and blankets, or as was the case at the Celebration and Apopka events, stake out spots when seating was already provided. In the latter case, it was common for these diners to occupy a table for the duration of their stay. Snacking on various foods bought from the surrounding food trucks, these groups would sometimes socialize for hours. In the case of some families, I noticed the kids would separate and occupy an area adjacent to their parent's location.

Based on my experience of the crowd as a customer and working behind the counter, I rarely witnessed anyone who seemed negative or displeased. Consumers were generally jovial and full of compliments for the food. Even when wait-times stretched longer than 20 minutes, I only perceived mild impatience from diners as they asked when their orders would be ready. With the exception of the RDV Sportsplex, in which office workers only have an hour or so for

lunch, most diners expect that their orders will take relatively longer to prepare than a conventional fast food chain. As Viveca, Steve, or Tim would clarify to anyone asking about their food, the trucks cook everything to order, unlike some brick-and-mortar restaurants and most fast food chains, food is not precooked, frozen or sitting under a heat lamp. Freshly prepared and cooked individually for the customer, food truck fare can often take longer to prepare. That said, for certain mobile vendors, wait times become frustratingly long. Viveca explained to me that some truck owner/operators intentionally serve food slower than necessary as a way to make counter lines appear longer, and, thus, more popular to casual passersby.

As an observer, walking through the throngs of food truck customers, I often caught snippets of conversation about what someone was going to order, how a particular food item tasted, or if one person or another had sampled dishes from a particular food truck. At each of the events I worked, it seemed that there was considerable customer interest in the food truck's operational history. These diners would typically ask how long we had been operating in Florida, where we were from, or if we had or would consider working other events. In such cases I would answer their inquiries as best I could or referred them to the owners who were always happy to answer any questions. Surprisingly enough, customers would often pepper me with more personal questions such as: "How do you know Steve and Tim?;" "Are you Viveca's son?;" or "What is your favorite item on the menu?"

Another thing I noticed was how many people would bring their dogs to local food truck events. With the possible exception of the RDV Sportsplex event, dog owners and their pets would be seen moving around the event grounds. The apparent appeal of gourmet food truck gatherings to such pet owners was something noticed by sisters Lauren and Cathy of the Sit N' Stay Pet Café food truck. Their food truck is different from those owned by their counterparts in

it is dedicated to serving food prepared exclusively for pets. As described on their website, “Sit ‘n Stay Pet Cafe is a mobile gourmet pet treat and doggie ice cream truck,” which “are made with human-grade, locally sourced, organic, natural and humanely raised/harvested ingredients” (“Sit ‘n Stay” 2013).



Figure 17: Sit N' Stay Pet Cafe at Conway's Wild Wednesdays



Figure 18: Two dogs at the Windermere event

If there was any common theme that emerged from all of the food truck events that I worked, it was the expression of satisfaction by both consumers and the owner/operators. According to SwedeDish's Viveca and Hakan or Dixieland Diner's Steve and Tim, the greatest rewards are the smiles and compliments they receive from pleased, happy customers. For example, one SwedeDish customer at the Fashion Square Food Truck Bazaar described tasting their signature burger as a life-changing event. Customers sampling Dixieland's Shrimp and Grits would often moan in pleasure after tasting the dish. More often than I initially anticipated, repeat customers of these respective truck operations would converse at length with the mobile restaurant owners. Through these interactions and actually working behind the counter, I was able to confirm what was previously mentioned in interviews. That is, it was through pleasing customers and the genuine social interactions this entailed that brought food truck owner/operators the greatest sense of fulfillment.

If anything showcased the loyalty and dedication of local gourmet food truck customers, it was the adversity they demonstrated amid Florida's persistent rainstorms. More than half of the events where I worked experienced some type of mild or heavy precipitation. The number of customers that did not leave but rather endured such inconveniences often surprised me. Those who brought umbrellas were able to place their orders without too much hassle, while those without tended to wait for their food under trees or some other type of cover. There were even some attendees who did not pay the rain any heed at all. Clearly, rain disruptions are an expected occurrence for most Central Floridians. For food truck owners, such weather can adversely affect sales and, if the rain is heavy enough, cancel events altogether. Luckily for owners, Orlando's gourmet food truck scene is filled with die-hard followers who will frequently brave the elements to attend their favorite weekly or monthly mobile vending events.



Figure 19: A brief period of rain during the Windermere event



Figure 20: Rain during the Windermere event with Dixieland Diner



Figure 21: Light rain and a big umbrella during the Avalon Food Truck Bazaar with Dixieland Diner



Figure 22: The silver lining for sticking it out

## Differences

While there are certainly a number of commonalities that link the examined food truck events and customers together, I did notice several differences that distinguish them from one another. For example, the RDV Sportsplex event is comprised primarily of office workers from nearby building complexes. It seemed that this clientele was dressed mainly in work attire and in a slight hurry to get back to work after their lunch. They seem to enjoy these gatherings however as they provide them an out of the ordinary dining experience during the workweek. Many online reviews on the website Yelp praise the event and food trucks for bringing something new every Friday instead of their usual fast food fare from Wendy's or Subway. While these diners probably still expect their food to be prepared quickly, Food Truck Fridays offers them the opportunity to eat something beyond their average workday dining experience.

By contrast, the Apopka event appeared geared more towards the surrounding community of local households and families. Many of those attending this event seemed to already know each other. In fact, Apopka residents operate seven out of the ten trucks that are invited to this event each month. The remaining few that are invited to participate, including the Dixieland Diner are from outside the area. Amid the sounds of live music, tables and blankets were set up and Little League ball players sold raffle tickets. Later, there was a competition to see which food truck had the best Shrimp and Grits with judges coming from the local fire station. Although many Dixieland Diner customers believed that Steve and Tim's entry was the best, a local food truck favorite, the Seafood Shack, ended up taking home the top honor.

Many Apopka residents express their excitement for this monthly event. I get the impression this is one of the few times that locals get to enjoy this kind of gourmet fusion fare as food trucks rarely visited this community previously. I met one attendee who was especially

excited about the event. Appearing to be in her mid-thirties and ordering for her and her child, Katie, told me that she was a local Apopka resident and made the statement about her and her family that, “We’re food trucks, rain or shine.” She says the reason that she purchased from the Dixieland Diner truck this time was that she likes to try out offerings from the new trucks. There was even a point during the night that Steve, Tim, and I witnessed in what Steve described as a “Beignet rush.” We received almost 15 orders of Beignets in about 30 minutes. According to one customer, this was due to the word spreading that the Dixieland Diner was serving fresh beignets. Overall, the Apopka event attendees were pleasant and Steve and Tim got along well with everyone.



Figure 23: Just before the Apopka Food Truck Round Up

The Windermere and Celebration food truck event is somewhat similar to the one held in Apopka. They both seem to attract community residents who do not regularly patronize mobile food vendors. Perhaps due to Windermere's and Celebration's prevailing affluence, many food trucks such as SwedeDish and Dixieland Diner raise their prices slightly. Presumably due to a higher household median income in Windermere, I noticed higher ticket values, a greater use of credit cards, and a greater percentage of the customers tipping in comparison to other events.. Where the adults in Apopka were drinking beer, provided by Shipyard's Beer Truck, most of adults in Windermere were drinking bottles of wine, primarily provided by Tim's Wine Market, a neighborhood wine bar. According to Viveca and Hakan and reiterated by Steve and Tim, the Windermere event is often the event in which owners can earn the most profits.



Figure 24: People set up at the Celebration Event



Figure 25: Always a spectacle at the Windermere Event

The Fashion Square Food Truck Bazaar also exhibited a wide range of people. Perhaps due to its proximity to the popular shopping mall, the Fashion Square event seemed to draw decidedly larger numbers of teenagers, whether in groups or couples. I also noted that at this event compared to those held in other neighborhoods, children appeared much more autonomous when it came to placing and paying for food orders.

#### A Different Business Model and City Regulations

Another difference that effectively separates many city food truck events is when mobile vendors work in cooperation with local drinking establishments. Tasty Tuesdays serves as a primary example in which three different bars in Orlando's Milk District invite area food trucks each week to set up shop behind their bar premises. During this event, patrons are free to take alcoholic beverages purchased inside the bars to the food trucks parked outside and vice versa.

Other examples include instances in which some gourmet food trucks work in tandem with local bars but independently from other food trucks. Bars that allow select food trucks to serve food near their parking areas include The Imperial, located in College Park, The Falcon Bar in Thornton Park, and The Bart Bar and Lil' Indies on Mills Avenue. All of these events attract a younger crowd, in their twenties and thirties, who are generally quite savvy about social media.

The bars with whom these gourmet food trucks partner are often as eclectic and unique as their food truck collaborators. The Imperial serves as an antique furniture store by day and a beer and wine garden at night. The Spacebar located in the Milk District and the Bart Bar on nearby Mills Avenue both feature free old school arcade games and walls decorated with local artwork. After attending Tasty Tuesdays and patronizing those bars where gourmet trucks served fresh food just outside, I came away with the feeling that I was witnessing one of Orlando's best kept secrets. Through perusing social media, I was quickly able to learn when and where these mutually beneficial collaborations were occurring. By checking my Facebook or Twitter accounts, I would know almost instantly if Fish Out of Water would be outside the Imperial on a Friday night or if Whompa Chompa would be serving C3PO's golden legs, their unique variation of fried chicken legs, outside of Lil' Indies. While attending these events, I could post pictures onto my Instagram or Facebook profiles, simultaneously announcing my physical location to friends within my online social community as well as providing free advertising to the truck or bar I was patronizing.



Figure 26: Instagram of my experience at Bart Bar and Fish Out of Water

Notably, these bar/food truck events have probably been the most affected by local municipal ordinances. As Yum Yum Cupcake’s Joey mentioned in an interview, mobile vendors were pretty much allowed to do whatever they wanted as the local food truck scene was initially emerging unless the city received specific complaints. Trucks participating in the first Tasty Tuesday events in 2011 and early 2012 were often parked on the streets right outside of local bars. Such practices, had by July, 2012, began to aggravate a nearby bar and grill owner who called city officials to complain that the Tasty Tuesday food trucks were obstructing the right-of-way just outside of their establishment. This event set in motion a number of enforcements that compelled participating mobile food vendors to shut down Tasty Tuesday for several weeks.

Eventually the event's coordinators arranged for the trucks to park in the lot behind the bars and the event has been successfully operating ever since.



Figure 27: The first Tasty Tuesday  
Source: Tasty Tuesdays Facebook page



Figure 28: Tasty Tuesday's now held in the parking lot

This episode was one of the first few cases of competition between traditional brick-and-mortar and newly launched gourmet food trucks. The Orlando city government, arguably feeling pressure from established city restaurateurs, passed legislation in May 2013 that placed certain restrictions on the gourmet food truck operations within the city limits. Known collectively as the Food Truck Pilot Program, these regulations addressed many aspects of the local food truck scene heretofore not previously codified such as what officially constitutes a food truck and what licenses are required to legally operate this type of mobile vending operation.

Summarizing the legislation, these restrictions include but are not limited to (1) making the downtown-core of Orlando off-limits to food trucks unless they have a concession agreement with the city; (2) banning food trucks from providing curbside service by not allowing them to sell on public streets, sidewalks, parks, and any other right-of-ways; and (3) limiting property owners to host a food truck only once per week (Orlando City Memorandum 2013). Such newly implemented regulations effectively stymied the efforts of gourmet food truck owner/operators who served food on the premises of area businesses such as The Imperial and Falcon Bar. While the Imperial had a food truck operating outside the bar at least five nights a week before legislation was passed, they now are only legally allowed to host a food truck one night per week. In response to these new ordinances, many food truck owners and others have joined together to form the Central Florida Food Truck Alliance. An organization designed and made up of “Food truck operators, loyal customers, local businesses and anyone who supports the rights of licensed food truck operators to run their businesses with the same freedom as any other Orlando business” (Central Florida Food Truck Alliance 2013).

The food truck owner/operators that I interviewed felt largely unaffected by these developments as most of their events were deemed and, thereby protected, by the new legislation

as “special events.” When I asked their opinion of the new municipal regulations, only a few were worried about the ordinances as they knew that if Mark invited them to participate, the red tape behind an event would likely have already been worked out. Presumably, it is still too early to tell how these new regulations will ultimately affect Orlando’s local food truck community. Thus far, there have been little or no signs that these regulations are strictly enforced.

### **Community Within: Gourmet Food Truck Owners**

Based on information collected through interviews and interactions with gourmet food truck owners, I reaffirmed my early hunch that a viable sense of community has developed among the food truck owners themselves. While the number of mobile food vendors currently operating within the scene is far from considerable, their growing ranks are still small enough to constitute a tight knit community, albeit one replete with a variety of cliques, rivalries, and partnerships.

My experiences within the scene confirmed that there remains a core group of veteran food truck owner/operators that first introduced the concept of hip gourmet food trucks to Central Florida. This cohort has helped usher in a relatively new foodway into the city. As Steve of Dixieland Diner described the situation, these veteran truck owner/operators may feel resentment towards the new mobile vendors until they prove themselves as being worthy of entering into the community. Steve gives the analogy that:

You know, it’s kind of like in the Vietnam War, or in the movie Platoon. If you were a new rookie, just landing in Vietnam, they were very cold to you. They didn’t want to get to know you because you might end up dead... The ones that were there the longest, ended up in cliques.

There was one particular food truck owner/operator that many of those I interviewed described as “snooty,” or “big headed.” Although they admitted the vendor’s menu and

customer service was amazing, this individual came off as “arrogant” and “stand-offish” to other food truck owners. While some tension may have developed among individual food truck owners, most vendors remain on amiable or pleasant terms with each other.

In a business climate where a truck’s food sales can ultimately make or break them, the display of mutual cooperation among local vendors appears rather uncommon. The presumption is that rather than working alone, coordinated efforts will generate greater business for all. “It’s the general consensus of owners that when it comes to food trucks, the more the merrier” (Westfall 2011). In many ways, local food truck owners do not really view each other as cutthroat competitors. Rather, they seem to see one another as fellow participants interested in legitimizing their trade and raising the visibility of their cause. The idea that selling side by side one another may attract more potential followers and help sustain a viable customer base where all food trucks can earn profits seems all but evident.

By working on various food trucks, I witnessed many of the interactions between individual owner/operators. Instead of purchasing food from each other’s trucks, these mobile vendors would often trade food instead. My first experience with this was while working with Viveca on SwedeDish at the Fashion Square Mall. One of the owners of the Caro-Bama BBQ truck, which served a fusion of South Carolina and Alabama influenced barbeque, told Viveca that he was craving one of her signature dishes, the Thor. Refusing to accept cash payment from him, he later brought Viveca one of his Pulled Pork BBQ sandwiches and a side of corn casserole. She explained to me that this was a common practice among food truck owners. I would later witness such exchanges at nearly all of the food truck event at which I worked. In many ways, this kind of food sharing serves as an icebreaker and a way to maintain smooth relations among fellow food truck owner/operators.

Another instance of cooperation among owners that I witnessed occurred between SwedeDish's Hakan and Dan, the owner of Korean BBQ Taco Box. Dan, who had recently purchased a new food truck, contacted the mechanically-inclined Hakan seeking advice. Discussing recurrent mechanical problems is a common topic among local food truck owners. According to Steve, he and Tim often talk at great lengths with the mobile vendors they run into at the local Restaurant Depot. He relates an incident in which:

Before we even got in the store. There was a Jamaican lady we used to know, there was Over Rice, the guy from Over Rice, and there was Viveca... And the lady from Taste Buds Catering... Just chit chatting, seeing what was going on, sharing stories, spoke about mechanical issues... Over Rice was having transmission trouble that week, so we spoke about his transmission...

Those owner/operators I interviewed generally maintained good relationships with most of their fellow mobile vendors. The only hints of animosity that I ever encountered, entailed either the petty resentments of some of veterans towards newer truck owners, a perceived enviousness among some less successful vendors towards more popular trucks, and the clash between Mark Baratelli and those organizing and participating in the Wild food truck. A post on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013 from the Wild Facebook page both highlights the tensions among them and suggests how the new city restrictions impact affected local food trucks.

So the Daily City (<http://www.thedailycity.com/>) says that all is fine with the food truck world! It is, for them, now that they are officially the official food truck pimps thanks to Orlando City Hall. Don't get me wrong, the Daily City has done great things for the scene, but it just doesn't fit the business model for many of the local trucks. These bazaars draw people who think "it's neat" to eat from a truck once a month. And, see photo below, they tend to gravitate toward the carnival foods and shy away from the more adventurous trucks. So as of now, the evolution of all Orlando Food Trucks is the dumbing-down to the masses rather than being adventurous and constantly pushing the envelope. You will see trucks that used to try new things now resorting to deep-frying everything to make some sales on the bazaar circuit. Orlando has reduced the what was thriving local food truck scene to a roaming carnival of food truck show ponies. All of them now striving to do a better hot-dog-on-a-stick (or insert whatever carnie/kiddie food

item that won't offend any food trucks) to get a piece of the suburban market share that is divided up between the 30 trucks that attend one of these events instead of working on food that gets you excited, food that makes you say "this is from a truck?!", food for people who are just getting off of work near downtown, or food for a demographic that just likes to frequent establishments other than a hot mall parking lot on a rainy Sunday evening and waiting in a long line just to have to stand and juggle their food without the option of a nice craft beer either. The Daily Citys explanation [sic] of how-to operate within the new city guidelines did not mention all of the locations that are now off limits, it simply mentions what's left (churches, schools, and "mainstreet" areas during city-approved events) to work with. It also did not address that 6 out of 7 nights a week were also taken away from food truck operators across the board. This is explained very well on the post at @central florida food truck alliance here on the FB. .

The new "pilot program" will stifle the creativity and the passion of the trucks that might be willing to make the severe changes to survive this program. And for the trucks that do make severe changes, it will put them out of business. . . . no doubt about it. Welcome to the homogenization of (what was) the most creative dining option . . . .

This is what is at stake: Entrepreneurship, free enterprise, open market . . . . . when the city government (or one power-trip-person in city hall) can step in and side with one contingent of local business owners over another, everyone should be alarmed about that. They have begun to tell you, the consumer, what it is you really want.... and apparently what that is a bunch of mediocre restaurants who would prefer to run and cry to city officials rather than try a little harder to "compete" with a food truck. But that is another rant entirely . . . [Wild Facebook page]

Strictly speaking, it is not really that out of the ordinary for such differing opinions and business models to come into conflict with each other. This is especially noticeable within such a small cohort of enterprises such as Orlando's burgeoning gourmet food truck scene.

## CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

### **First Impressions and Introduction**

In this chapter, I revisit the research questions posed at the outset of my thesis. Next, I review how local gourmet food trucks inform Orlando's socio-economic and political landscape. Finally, I discuss how these mobile food vendors and their customers work to create a viable community identity.

Before I had decided to focus my thesis research on the recent rise of gourmet food trucks in Orlando, I knew very little about them. Admittedly, I was only vaguely aware about the depth and reach of Orlando's gourmet food truck scene as well as those elsewhere in the U.S. Only on rare occasions had I ever bought food from these types of mobile vendors. I had driven past gourmet food trucks here and there and may have overheard conversations about specific mobile restaurants such as The Korean Taco Box. My first experience patronizing a gourmet food truck entailed ordering from one called the Fish Out of Water as it was operating outside of a bar across from the restaurant where I was employed at in late 2011. I never really considered buying sushi from a food truck since I always thought they served greasy and fried fare. A coworker who vouched for the quality of their menu ultimately convinced me to set aside my preconceptions and go ahead and partake. Since then, I would now consider myself an avid member of Orlando's gourmet food truck community, both physically and virtually.

### **Research Questions Revisited**

My ethnographic findings help elucidate the three research questions that I posed in Chapter One: namely (1) what do local gourmet food truck operations symbolize in various economic, socio-economic, and political contexts?; (2) in what ways do gourmet food trucks imbue meaning through the various strategies they employ in both the individual and communal

level?; and (3) in what way have these cultural and social factors given rise to gourmet food truck's recent growth in Orlando and across U.S. cities?

### Slow Economy Equals Fast Food Trucks and Anti-corporation Attitudes

In many ways, it seems that the recent emergence of today's gourmet food trucks closely parallels the past rise of chuckwagons, lunch wagons, and so-called "roach coaches." Chuckwagons served the growing numbers of cattle workers traveling across the Western U.S. in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century; lunch wagons arose in the 1930s as a way to serve affordable fare to office workers at a time when such services were largely unavailable, and "roach coaches" emerged not only as a way for recent immigrants to gain a foothold in the American Dream but also as an effective method to feed day laborers working at city construction sites.

The late 2000s' economic recession served as the primary motivation for many budding chefs to venture into the gourmet food truck scene. Such enterprises were appealing as they did not require the same type of start-up capital as traditional brick-and-mortar restaurants. These aspiring restaurateurs, following the lead of chef Roi of Kogi BBQ in Los Angeles, took the initiative to own and operate their own food truck.

For example, the proprietor of Orlando's The Crooked Spoon food truck, Chef Steve Saelg, always wanted to operate his own standalone restaurant. He was unable to accomplish this dream, especially since it represented such a huge financial risk within the current economic climate. After working in higher end restaurants and private clubs, Chef Saelg realized that a mobile food truck held real possibilities for him. Chef Saelg stated, "Food trucks have lower overhead and startup costs than traditional restaurants," he was able to realize his dream and provide his food on his terms (Westfall 2011). Operating from his food truck for three years, "Chef Saelg decided to hang up his truck keys and fulfill a long-time dream and new era for The

Crooked Spoon brand. “ By August 2013, “...he opened the doors to a full-service gastropub in Clermont, Florida” (The Crooked Spoon 2013).

Food truck owner/operators that I interviewed provided similar testaments about wanting to own their own business but not having the funds to open a full-scale standalone restaurant. The owners of both Over Rice and Dixieland Diner expressed that they were interested in a business that served food but did not have the financial means for a venture as risky as a restaurant. Steve said that he and Tim would “love to have [their] own restaurant, so that was the driving force, wanting to have [their] own restaurant, and not being able to afford a real restaurant.” Each vendor I interviewed except Viveca and Hakan expressed interest in eventually owning a brick-and-mortar counterpart to their gourmet food truck operations. It is still too early to tell whether they will ultimately hang up their keys similar to Chef Saelg or keep the truck operational as a side business. However, it is still unclear if the economic recession was the direct cause for Orlando’s gourmet food truck owners not having enough funds for a brick-and-mortar restaurant, or if there were other factors involved.

During the late 2000s, local food noticed a “recession-era mini-boom.” Not solely based on the economic recession this correlation also has its roots in another general trend.

Venkatesh Rao in “Why We Need a Food Truck Index” has this to say:

With the rise of the modern local food industry, complete with tweeting food trucks, I think the real potential of globalization is finally being realized. Globalization *is* about homogenization, but it does not have to be of the impoverished variety where everyone eats McDonald’s burgers. As economists like Tyler Cowen have argued, it can be homogeneity via a rich, localized diversity: anybody, anywhere on the planet, having access to an equally diverse local food scene that has a globalized sensibility. [2011:1]

A common theme among those I interviewed was a desire to break free from corporate America. Owners wanted to express their individuality in ways that were previously impossible

while working corporate jobs. Many gourmet food truck owners want to own and control their own businesses. For example, Joel did not really like the direction his former employer, Quicksilver, was heading. Since he felt that the surf company was becoming too corporate, he decided to quit and move to Orlando where he eventually launched his own gourmet food truck. After working Over Rice and farmer's markets for over a year now, Joel claims he prefers his choice over working for another job that might make him twice as much money.

Steve and Tim from Dixieland Diner share a similar story. Tired of working for "corporate America," they both left Subway to become their own bosses. As previously quoted by Zerrer, "A growing segment of the middle class is bored with the Applebee's, TGI Friday's, and Chili's which sell everything but lack the personality and individuality in both food and eating experiences" (Zerrer 2011). Steve attributed the recent success of gourmet food trucks to a variety of reasons that highlight local consumer sensibilities. Along with serving great food, gourmet food trucks are "small businesses, and I think people are attracted to that sort of thing, and I think they're attracted to unique food. Most restaurants are very generic... I want something unique. I don't want to be eating onion rings and steak all the time." By all appearances, there is a nationwide consumer trend towards embracing local and non-industrial food. Gourmet food trucks, rising as both a response to the recent economic recession and the needs of consumers, have managed to establish footholds in Orlando and other major U.S. cities.

### Socio-economic Implications

As previously mentioned, mobile food is not a new phenomenon in urban America. Many U.S. cities have a long standing history of vendors selling food in push-carts and traditional food trucks. From the existing literature and my own research, it can be argued that

the recent surge in interest and popularity concerning this new breed of mobile food, the gourmet food truck, exposes issues related to socio-economic and class divides.

As Caldwell states, in contrast to traditional food trucks, which “remains largely a business of immigrants,” “The vendor, menu, and even the customer look different.” As quoted earlier, “The emerging micro-blogging food truck vendor population is predominantly non-immigrant, and where they are not, class and status usually sets them apart” (2011:307). When I asked Joey from Yum Yum Cupcake what sets gourmet food trucks apart from traditional food trucks his response was rather revealing: “It’s the three points, its menu selection, it’s the brand, and it’s the way you market. We are not open, at 2am, on Orange Blossom trail serving rapists. I mean, there’s nothing wrong with that, it’s just not what a gourmet food truck is.”

The murder of a food truck owner last year in April 2012, reinforces this preception. Mireya Maria Alvarado, age 65, was robbed and shot while she and her husband were closing their Arepera Solita truck near East Colonial and Semoran at 2:30am (Jacobson 2012). When I spoke to Joey about the incident, he admitted that it was certainly tragic and the potential for crime is scary, but the way gourmet food trucks operate in groups generally keeps them safe from similar occurrences.

Similar to Hernandez’s previous assertion that

It’s fair to say that while some food trucks in Boyle heights and East LA were subject to local government restrictions, fines, and jail time consequent to illegality, another style of food truck was receiving notoriety as gastronomically innovative and a growing popular cultural trend (2009:11).

I believe that is it can also be argued, through elucidations from my interviewees, that gourmet food trucks have experienced the popularity they have in Orlando because of their appeal to middle and upper class populations. With a more stylized appearance, relatively more gourmet

cuisine, and their use of trend conscious social media, gourmet food trucks are arguably perceived as being of a higher status than traditional mobile food vendors. Consumers that now patronize local gourmet food truck bazaars may have never considered purchasing from one of the stigmatized “roach coaches” that have been around for decades. To confirm and expand on this hypothesis, further research into customer’s perspectives is needed.

In Caldwell’s article, she quotes Mintz and his claim “that ‘if one way of eating is considered lower than another, then there is hierarchy’” (2011:316). This distinction is witnessed in the areas that gourmet food trucks choose to serve. As Joey mentioned, gourmet food trucks are not serving on Orange Blossom Trail, in Paramour, or other perceivably less affluent neighborhoods. However, I do believe that as gourmet food trucks continually expand their presence, their areas of influence will grow as well. Spreading into a greater number of cities and neighborhoods on a continual basis, gourmet food trucks are seemingly cutting across class divides. Mike Baratelli, the pioneer of Orlando’s Food Truck Bazaar, covered and blogged about Orlando’s traditional food trucks years before the gourmet trucks arrived on the scene. I suspect that Orlando may experience developments similar to those documented by Caldwell in New York. That, “as more specialty cuisine is introduced to the street, perhaps the cuisine/class division of who eats what may be shrinking here as well” (2011:317).

#### What is Gourmet? Food and Political Afterthought

As mentioned earlier, there appears to be a growing trend towards more local and organic food sources throughout the U.S. It became clear throughout my research, that although serving menu items made up from local and organic ingredients is preferable to both owner/operators and consumers, it is not the rule. Local gourmet food truck owner/operators have to strike a balance between the ingredients they use and the resultant cost of the items they serve.

There are cases in such as Big Wheel Provisions, and their food truck spin off, Big Wheel Truck, who served as an example of food trucks preparing and serving ingredients purchased locally. While currently on hiatus, having moved to Maine for a year, Big Wheel Provisions claims on their website as of October, 2013 that their goal is to change “the way people in our community think about food, demonstrating that local ingredients raised the right way really shine when handled properly.” Local Yolk’l is another Orlando gourmet food truck, which appeals to consumer preferences for locally sourced ingredients. A local farm provides all of Local Yolk’l’s eggs and their bread and bagels are from local producers as well. By supporting local food sources and emphasizing the importance of supporting area economies, gourmet trucks such as Big Wheel Provisions and Local Yolk’l are able to cultivate a sense of connectedness with the community and establish food related sensibilities as well.



Figure 29: Big Wheel Menu, highlighting locally sourced ingredients

Source: <http://berrybasil.wordpress.com/>

I spoke to each of my informants about the topic of serving local and organic ingredients and what constitutes a menu as being “gourmet.” While I received a variety of responses, with Joel of Over Rice even saying, they do not “claim gourmet,” there was a similar acknowledgement as to what separated their cuisine from eateries such as traditional food trucks and fast food chains. While everyone was careful to iterate that they were not professionally trained chefs, they all still claimed to practice small batch, from scratch cooking. The way Joey describes their cooking is that:

They’re scratch made cupcakes. So the things that make us different than, roach coaches; a dessert roach coach, might take a funnel cake batter and put it in a fryer and serve funnel cake for \$5, our cupcakes are scratch made, everything’s made from scratch.

This is similar to the way in which SwedeDish’s Viveca and Hakan would never use premade burger patties or instant mashed potatoes. Joel shares the same mentality which is exemplified in the way in which he will “manicure and manicure” his chicken until it is of a caliber he can be proud to serve. The quality of the ingredients and the care that goes into preparing dishes is of the utmost importance to the gourmet food truck owner/operators that I interviewed. Above all else, the general consensus was that a truck’s food and developing repeat customers is what determined their success or not.

Great care is taken in the preparation of dishes, yet very few ingredients are locally sourced or organic. While this food truck cuisine may be made from scratch and primarily prepared and served on a day-to-day basis, the majority of ingredients come from sources such as The Restaurant Depot. In my interview with Joel, he highlighted the fundamental reason they cannot all use locally sourced and organic ingredients. “We would go broke if we bought local or organic or anything like that, and we don’t claim ‘gourmet,’ and I want to give something

good at a decent price. If you do that local, organic way, it's expensive." Despite this claim, all of Over Rice's produce is still purchased at city farmer's markets from local sources, lending further support to Orlando's local food economy.

Rao states that "While most food trucks boast *fresh* food, they are not ideologically committed to local sourcing of ingredients at all costs. They seem to source based on costs, availability and customer preferences" (2011:2). When I asked Steve and Tim if they noticed any trucks serving local and organic cuisine, Steve's response was:

If they can, then they do. But I don't see a lot of trucks tooting it on their menu as much as I did on Big Wheel this year... Once you start getting into locally sourced everything, then prices go way up. That's why Big Wheel was \$12, \$14, Fork in the Road gets \$16 for certain entrees. Is the food truck crowd really going to pay that? I would say a small percentage will, and that's fine if you can do it. I can't imagine me trying to run around, trying to buy all that stuff...

Gourmet food trucks inability to have a wholly local and organic menu does not prevent them from stimulating the local economy. By purchasing from local sources whenever feasible, working in tandem with local bars and shops, and increasing foot traffic around where events are held, gourmet food trucks certainly add a degree of revitalization in the areas in which they operate. The consumer's choice to support these local small businesses is part of appeal of dining at these mobile foodways and also a way that allows diners to find meaning through their community and their individual food choices.

### Gourmet Food Trucks: Communal and Self Identity

Through my research of Orlando's gourmet food truck scene, combined with the existing literature, I argue that gourmet food trucks are unique in their ability to form communal relationships, reinforce existing ones, and provide the individual consumer with the opportunity to make a declaration about themselves. At their foundation, gourmet food trucks revolve

around exchanging the food they serve in return for money from the consumer. By looking at all of the aspects of gourmet food trucks and the influence the scene has created around itself, we witness a much greater effect than merely satiating the appetites of the general population for a time. While a more in depth look into consumers perceptions of gourmet food trucks and the reasons they attend these events is desired, I believe important insights, from my experience and interviews, can still be gleaned concerning communal and individual identity of both consumers and owner/operators.

As described by Bourdieu in “Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste,” “The act of eating is more than a process of bodily nourishment – it is an elaborate performance of gender, social class, and self-identity” (1984:196). In “Dining Out: The Hyper reality of Appetite” Joanne Finkelstein makes the statement that “From its modern beginnings, the restaurant has been associated with performative pleasures – namely, being seen in public, seeing who else was in public, being entertained by the restaurateur as well as other diners, and experimenting with new sensory pleasures” (1998:202). While Finkelstein is referring to the brick-and-mortar restaurant, I believe gourmet food trucks in Orlando have established themselves as greater purveyors of these aspects of eating than other existing eateries. Throughout my interviews, it was noted that no other eateries are quite like gourmet food trucks. Mobile food events provide a space where people from all ages and backgrounds can gather in a community setting in which the focus point is on food and eating. As Finklestein states:

Whether it be a need to be seen by others, a desire to display personal wealth, or to play the role of gastronome, bon vivant, ardent lover or fashion habitué... dining out blends a lower order of being – namely, the nourishment of the human body – with a higher order of experience – namely, that of taking pleasure – and thereby elevates the banality of eating to the abstract, aesthetic, and symbolic. [1998:202]

We affirm our place in a virtual and physical community when we dine at and share our experiences of gourmet food trucks. In a Facebook comment by The Pastrami Project food truck owner, George Markward, he says:

One thing I would add is no matter how much work it is or how hard you have to fight city hall, it's worth it. The people I meet in my window of The Pastrami Project make it all worthwhile, be they my wonderful customers or my new chef friends from other trucks, I am having the time of my life! [Central Florida Food Truck Alliance Facebook Page]

As shown in Figure 30, you can see an instance that captures this statement. Through his truck he has earned a follower where the experience of eating the food he served was enough for the consumer to share it to their online community.



Figure 30: Foodie Instagramming about her Experience with The Pastrami Project

In “Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape,” it is described that a foodie “understand[s] their food consumption to be particularly cultural and symbolically important, rather than a matter of sustenance alone” (Johnston & Baumann 2010:198). In this way, the “foodies,” or customers, see consuming and sharing experiences about food as much

more than simply fulfilling a biological necessity. Food becomes an experience. Caldwell describes gourmet food trucks as:

Complete with the total experience, from online, offline, and in line, are feel-good mobiles that have virally captured the attention of the street food public and the online social networking in one. In both these spaces, they have introduced an alternative consumption of communication and taste... We are sure to see food assisting the progress under way, creating greater shifts that merge and transform culture within the sociology of food. [2011:319]

As is evident from my interviews with the owners of gourmet food trucks, this experience is not entirely limited to the consumer. Owners have found themselves a place in a community and affirmed their identities through the perusal of their dreams just as consumers have found a place to eat foods that make them taste, think, feel, and share.

It is through these combined strategies of engaging and satisfying, and the resulting experiences of both the operator/owners and consumers, that have resulted in the explosive popularity gourmet food trucks have witnessed in Orlando and other U.S. cities. In Orlando specifically, gourmet food trucks have become especially popular through events such as the food truck bazaars. Arguably, if it were not for Orlando's distinct neighborhoods spread throughout Central Florida, gourmet food trucks would not be experiencing the popularity that they are.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

At its theoretical foundations, this thesis is rooted in Sydney Mintz's ideas about food and choice. In "Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom," Mintz says about eating; "...this act of choosing to consume apparently can provide a temporary, even if mostly spurious, sense of choice, of self, and thereby freedom" (1997:13). My research and the existing literature examines why consumers have made the individual choice to eat from gourmet food trucks; and in such numbers that they have rapidly spread throughout the U.S. in a relatively few short years. I make the argument that it is the economic, virtual, political, sensory, and social aspects of gourmet food trucks that have all intertwined to form the catalyst for today's growing food truck phenomenon.

By ethnographically describing the local food truck scene at various levels of operation, I have identified several common legal and competitive obstacles as well as overarching strategies utilized by various gourmet food trucks. The obstacles range from acquiring licenses and passing health inspections to defending themselves against competitive brick-and-mortar restaurants as well as city ordinances. I have also found that the success gourmet food trucks have encountered is largely due to the number of strategies that they have developed to further their business and something less tangible, the heart and effort they put towards that business. These strategies include creating an individual personality for themselves through branding and their cuisine, the use of social, online networking, teaming up with other food trucks to create multi-truck events such as the bazaars, partnering with local and unique bars in a synergistic fashion, and the use small batch, from scratch cooking with both local and higher quality ingredients.

Born from necessity, convenience, and utility, food trucks have come to represent much more than the iterations of their past. Nostalgia and a break from conformity have combined to usher in these new mobile eateries. Helping create a viable sense of community while also establishing unique identities, gourmet food trucks speak volumes about the owners and the consumers themselves. Whether gourmet food trucks continue to thrive for years to come, or eventually evolve into another foodway entirely, for now at least, they are providing opportunities to both budding entrepreneurs realizing their dreams, and to consumers, who feel the desire to interact on a biological, social, and personal level.

### **Future Research**

By merging eclectic fusion cuisine with the increasingly social aspects of gourmet food truck dining, these restaurant-on-wheels warrant particular anthropological consideration. Such an examination can elucidate aspects of what local food truck preferences reveal about present day attitudes of what and how we eat. My research on Orlando's gourmet food truck scene helps contribute to anthropological studies on local foodways and dining practices. A more in depth look into Orlando's food truck scene as well as other U.S. cities would lead to a greater understanding of these mobile eateries as purveyors of social and communal interaction through food. Perhaps most important of all in further research projects, is a more detailed look into consumer perceptions of gourmet food trucks and the meaning they provide.

## APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

### Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: Zachary A. Hawk

Date: June 14, 2012

Dear Researcher:

On 6/14/2012, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination  
Project Title: Exploring the Phenomenon of Gourmet Food Trucks in Orlando  
Investigator: Zachary A. Hawk  
IRB Number: SBE-12-08354  
Funding Agency:  
Grant Title:  
Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Patria Davis on 06/14/2012 11:19:35 AM EDT

IRB Coordinator

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