



The Farmer's Daughter food truck, part of Greater Spokane Food Trucks

Food Trucks Serve Up Meetings Buzz

Mobile food makes dining a breeze **BY NATALIE COMPAGNO & GREG FREITAS**

» IT'S BEEN 15 YEARS since the food truck phenomenon swept the country with a groundswell of social media-powered, post-Great Recession foodie mobile destinations. Suddenly, any chef in the country could secure a truck and deliver high-quality dishes, many serving world cuisines previously untried in some locales. The phenomenon has been a huge boon for event planners. With the democratization of restaurant kitchens, more cooks can serve more kinds of food to eager, hungry meetings attendees.

DEEP ROOTS & REGIONAL FARE

Although a chuck wagon on the Oregon Trail was almost certainly the Pacific Northwest's first food truck, many point to Chef Josh Henderson's Skillet Airstream in Seattle, Washington, as the inflection point in 2007. But some local

cooks go back even further. Dante Rivera has been "slingin' dogs" in his Dante's Inferno Dogs truck for 23 years. A Detroit, Michigan, native who was inspired by the novel "A Confederacy of Dunces"—with its lead character a hot dog vendor in New Orleans—Rivera launched his first food truck in Seattle in 2000. He has been riding the wave ever since, even inventing a custom "cream cheese gun" for the wildly popular Seattle Dog: grilled onions, cream cheese, and 100% beef.

Rivera's current business model is events-only, a key selling point for planners. "The average food truck check these days is \$15 to \$20, but I can't charge that for a dog. But my expenses are basically the same—employees, truck, gas. Events are the way to go—there is no risk for either party." Rivera considers his longstanding relationship with Amazon in South Lake Union as his bread and butter, once serving an astonishing 3,500 people from seven trucks in just two hours. But he still calls his work with Seattle Children's Hospital his favorite. "Those kids are so sweet, kind, and patient," he recalls.

Event planner Kevin Kane, who has produced events for 25 years with his Seattle-based company Golf Events, which is managed by parent company TruePoint Partners, concurs. "Small business owners are always good partners. They hustle and appreciate the business," he says. He lists Ezell's Fried Chicken, Flair Tacos, and Stan's BBQ as frequent and reliable vendors, in addition to Dante's.

He ticks off the ways food trucks make his events richer and life easier. "The food is fresh and made to order. And food trucks are self-sufficient—rain or shine—and do not need a lot of extra support besides directions and timing. Pricing with a mobile business is also more

efficient and more cost-effective than a normal catering kitchen.” Kane enjoys the serendipitous creativity that occurs when multiple trucks cater an event. “Themes with food trucks make the experience even better. At the Brighton Jones MESI Golf Invitational, we combined a taco truck with a margarita bar, for example.”

Food trucks also offer the opportunity to support women-owned and minority-owned businesses, helping clients support their diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Street food vendors also often give more back to the community than corporate vendors. When a business is that small and mobile, it truly becomes part of the fabric of the community.

Additionally, planners should take advantage of the work that has already been done by local tourism boards and food truck collectives. In Spokane, Greater Spokane Food Trucks is a collective of the area’s coffee, dessert, food, and drink trucks, all in one place. Most trucks are tied to locally owned restaurants and businesses, and booking is easy. Some top options include The Scoop’s Maisey Truck, which also makes for whimsical group photo ops. Roaming Hunger is another great food truck for planners.

Farther north in Alaska, food trucks provide the easiest way for attendees to sample the signature cuisine of the region. Eventgoers heading to the capital, Juneau, can dine on tacos made with fresh-caught rockfish at Deckhand Dave’s or smoked salmon crepes at Alaskan Crepe Escape. In Anchorage, planners can support veteran-owned Jerome’s Kitchen Streatery, serving Louisiana-style street food with recipes collected from the past century.

FARE FROM BEYOND THE BORDER

Eventgoers might instead be craving fare that originates from elsewhere beyond the U.S., which can be obviously difficult to obtain when you’re not actually there. Some food trucks in the Pacific Northwest take that challenge by storm, and nowhere is



Crate food truck, also one of Greater Spokane Food Trucks

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—KEVIN KANE, OWNER, GOLF EVENTS

this more apparent than in the Vancouver, British Columbia, suburb of Richmond, with its buzzing Japanese food culture. Japadog, beloved by the late Anthony Bourdain, caters for groups of all sizes, from team lunches to private parties. Planners should also check out Taco Nori, where the owners deep-fry seaweed into taco shells, which are then filled with sushi. That’s the appeal of food trucks: serving guests food they never knew they needed until that first scrumptious bite.

In Olympia, Washington, Tevin Campbell came to the Pacific Northwest from Jamaica just two years ago. Inspired by the cooking of the grandmother who raised him, and with the help of assistance programs that reward enterprising mobile chefs, his food truck Jerk An’ Tingz launched downtown this year. Serving classic Jamaican dishes like Jerk Chicken, Curry Goat, and Oxtail Rasta Pasta, the truck is available for events of all sizes.

Most of the major meeting cities around the Pacific Northwest maintain a healthy roster of brick-and-mortar restaurants that also have mobile options. In Bend, Oregon, for example, husband-and-wife team Steven and Amy Draheim have become known for their customizable combination of fixed and mobile eateries. Planners can’t always please everyone, but they will certainly come close with their Barrio and Shimshon food trucks, serving Mexican and Israeli food, respectively. **m+e**

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