



TAKING YOUR FOOD ON THE ROAD

by Mary Lou Santovec

Style watchers point to street vending and mobile carts as the next hot trend. Street food is generally fast, fresh, cheap and eclectic. Whether you yearn to own a restaurant or simply want to expand the audiences you are reaching, food carts can be a relatively inexpensive and effective way to test the waters or develop a following. The financial investment is limited, and done well, it can lay the groundwork for a brick-and-mortar restaurant.

Just ask Krishna Pradhan and his wife, Bishnu. Raves from the Pradhans' friends and colleagues about Bishnu's cooking encouraged the couple to open a restaurant. So in 1981, Krishna, who was teaching his native Nepalese language at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, began researching options.

Calling on a few landlords, he realized the "triple net" of rent, insurance and taxes would be cost prohibitive. "A restaurant was out of our ability and capability because we didn't have a lot of capital," said Krishna. But an option presented itself when the City of Madison began promoting vending around the Capitol Square and the Library Mall on campus.

The Pradhans invested in a food cart and began serving a limited menu of curried vegetables and chicken, vegetable fritters and samosas on the Library Mall. They soon developed a following and in 1986 opened Himal Chuli, a full-service restaurant. They have since gone on to open two additional restaurants, Dobhan and Chautara.

Markos Regasa tells a similar story. His job options were limited when he graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. But lack of capital and experience in the food industry didn't deter him in opening a food cart on the Library Mall in 1992. On the menu were dishes from his native Ethiopia with selections such as coconut curried chicken, curried rice and peanut chicken recipes taken from other African countries.

In 2000, Regasa opened Buraka, which he views as a complement to his food cart. "I've been in business a long time and wanted to expand into a restaurant," he said. "You have to grow to something." Street vending can be an end in itself or, in the case of the Pradhans and Regasa, a means to end, opening doors to bigger things.

Today's customers have very

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Food Safety on the Road: State and Local Regulations

If you're considering a food cart or participating in a festival or charity event, you need to be in compliance with Wisconsin's Food Code. It is important to know that you may need to meet additional requirements from your local health department if there are applicable local ordinances.

The Food Code's Chapter 9 "Mobile Food Establishments" lays out what you need to know about carts and trucks. Perhaps the most key information is that every mobile food establishment needs to have a licensed facility as its base. This chapter also explains other requirements relating to water supply and liquid waste.

Chapter 10 "Temporary Food Establishments" outlines the rules for those interested in having a booth, stand or tent at an event. To protect the health and safety of the general public, temporary food establishment operations may be limited in terms of the number of persons served, methods of preparation and storage, the kinds of utensils used or the type of food served, so it's important to determine the scope of your plan with the health department. These restrictions for temporary food establishments vary on a case by case basis and require you to get approval from your health inspector.

To access the Wisconsin's Food Code visit WRA's website at www.wirestaurant.org or www.legis.state.wi.us/rsb/code/dhs/dhs196_app.pdf. If you don't have Internet access, call the Hotline Team at 800-589-3211.

As described in this article, some local municipalities have additional requirements for carts or temporary food establishments. After ensuring that you meet Food Code requirements, it's smart to check city ordinances before you take your food on the road.

sophisticated palates. While the "Greatest Generation" favors the supper club menu, Boomers and Gen X and Y eschew the pickled herring appetizers and cheese dip in favor of ethnic dishes from Africa, Indonesia and Asia.

Hot dog higher ed

And of course, don't forget that favorite of street food, the hot dog. Mark Reitman, the self-proclaimed professor of hot dogs and owner of Hot Dog University (www.hotdogu.com), has found a calling teaching wannabe food entrepreneurs the finer points of running a hot dog cart. A native Chicagoan who "escaped to Wisconsin," Reitman ran his course at the Milwaukee Public Market until February 2009. Reitman then moved the training to the Vienna Beef Company's Chicago plant. His unique Hot Dog University course has received national media attention. In fact, CBS Sunday Morning commentator, Bill Geist called his course the "Harvard of Encased Meats."

As a boy, Reitman "romanticized having my own hot dog business." When he took early retirement from his educational career, Reitman's wife nixed his idea of opening a restaurant, "so I convinced her to go into the cart business instead," he said.

Reitman had a 1,200-pound hot dog cart built in Southern California. He tested it a few places, finally setting up at the Prime Outlets shopping center in Kenosha. Every weekend for three years he sold hot dogs, soda and ice cream in the mall's center court. "I found I'm grossing more money on the weekends selling hot dogs at the Prime Outlets than after 24 years in education with a master's degree," said Reitman of the experience. Customers were asking him how they could do the same thing.

When the mall added a food court, Reitman decided to teach others how to run a similar business. "You can make a decent living if you work weekends and at certain stores during the year, like the garden centers in the spring," he said. Reitman also teaches courses on how to cater parties and special events.

Being green and in touch

Sydney Krieger opened the mobile Coffee Pirate in March 2009 after



trying unsuccessfully to find an appropriate coffee shop location. The mobile coffee shop is housed in a retrofitted 1978 Toyota Chinook mini motor home, which Krieger parks during the warmer months at various locations around Madison and Cambridge. Sustainability is her mantra. "I'm all about recycling things as much as I can," she said, explaining the used vehicle.

Krieger sells fair trade, organic beverages including Italian sodas, chai, teas, hot cocoa and French-pressed coffee. Her paper products are biodegradable. She has regular stops but customers can also find her schedule on the website: www.coffeepirate.net.

Krieger's use of her website to help customers locate her is a strategy used by many food cart operators, particularly those in larger cities. Cart owners cleverly employ social media tools like Twitter and Facebook to keep customers abreast of location and menu changes. This has proven quite effective.

Location. Location. Location.

Finding a location can be a matter of experimentation. Certain streets and areas with seemingly lots of potential can be off limits. James Davis, who owns JD's, a mobile kitchen that sells Polish sausage sandwiches and fries in Madison, recently set up shop on city-owned property outside of James Madison Memorial High School, much to the consternation of the school's principal.

The cart was popular with the students, but as a result of Davis's

appearance, the Madison City Council introduced a resolution preventing food vendors from setting up without permission. The city does have a mandatory juried review process for carts that want to sell on the Library Mall or around the Capital Concourse, two popular locations.

Festivals and events

There are operators whose only business is a cart or a stand. Then there are the restaurants that set up booths at charity events hoping to raise their profile, attract new customers or simply give back to the community. Black and Tan, a Green Bay-based fine dining restaurant, brings its signature crab cakes to Feast with the Beasts, a benefit for the N.E.W. (Northeast Wisconsin) Zoo and WRA programs. "It's a good cause and it helps keep the zoo going," said Aaron Morse, the restaurant's executive chef. But just as important, it gets Black and Tan's name out there.

Morse decided to serve the crab cakes, one of the restaurant's most popular appetizers, because they hold together well. "If you're not serving a good product, it's a problem," he said. Potential customers will judge your entire restaurant by a single menu item

and bad exposure is far worse than none at all.

Three years ago, the Claddagh Irish Pub began appearing at The Taste of Madison, an annual two-day event showcasing some 65 local restaurants with proceeds benefitting United Cerebral Palsy of Dane County. The restaurant served a miniature version of its Jameson burger, a beef patty covered with both a cheddar/ale sauce and a Jameson Irish whiskey sauce topped with fried onion straws.

"It's so great to see that many people come through and ask 'Where are you located?'" said Emily Hudson, Claddagh's general manager of the event. "It opened up a lot of avenues and doors." Besides the positive exposure, the burger received a good review in the local media.

Planning pays off

To take food to the masses requires a lot of pre-planning and effort. First, there are the health and sanitation regulations to contend with. With a mobile food establishment, Food Code regulations require that food must be stored, prepared or washed in commercial kitchens. Requirements are similar for push carts and self-contained

mobile food establishments. (See sidebar on page 22.)

Making sure that your booth has access to water, refrigeration and electricity can be challenging. At the Taste of Madison, restaurants are provided with refrigerated trucks and electrical power. At other events, vendors will have their own generators and bring water with them.

Then there's the permit process. Each county and sometimes each city require a separate permit. Special events generally also require a permit.

And there's the issue of competition. Because of its hours of operation and price point, Black and Tan has no problems with food carts setting up shop outside of its location. But some Milwaukee restaurants are concerned that unlicensed carts are luring potential customers away and cutting into their profits, particularly at night.

Taking your food on the road can offer good profit margins and offer a way to reach people that may never find their way to your restaurant or can be a way for a new restaurateur to get their feet wet before jumping into a full scale restaurant. And it looks like this trend is just starting to take off. **WR**

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