Food Truck Frenzy: An Analysis of the Gourmet Food Truck in Philadelphia

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Abstract:

For my senior thesis I am going to investigate the rampant rise in popularity of gourmet food trucks in the past six or seven years. When I first arrived at Swarthmore, our campus was visited by one upscale cupcake truck during the spring semester that had to endure a line of almost 150 people and ran out of ingredients within an hour and a half. Now our campus is being visited multiple times a semester by these food trucks, which are being contracted whenever the school needs a novel, different, and pleasurable eating experience. Meanwhile, the town of Swarthmore is busy organizing events such as the Food Truck-a-thon where almost a dozen food trucks leave their local corners in Philadelphia to come ten miles away to a tiny college town to feed eagerly awaiting customers. This is not just happening in Philadelphia and Swarthmore either, this is occurring across the country. Events like the Food Truck-a-Thon simply did not exist four years ago. To me, this makes the popularity of food trucks very apparent; this trend has established itself in the American food system. I am curious to see as to why these gourmet food trucks have made such an impact on the American culinary scene. I want to understand how street food has transformed from our classic notions of hot dog stands and ice cream trucks to a new contemporary version of “meals on wheels” that is very reflective of the society that has created it.
Introduction

American street food culture has been historically one-dimensional & stagnant in comparison to other countries such as Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, France, India, Mexico, Vietnam, Egypt, Israel, England, etc... Whereas street food is a vital facet of urban life in these countries, in the United States it seems that street food has always been present, yet overshadowed by the colossal fast food companies and the multitude of other fixed-location eating establishments dispersed throughout the country. Street food vendors were just another part of the cityscape; if you were hungry enough and you had a buck, you could get a hotdog for a dollar, be satisfied, and move on with your day. Yet street foods never reached the mass popularity or the cultural affinity of the entire population as they have in megacities such as Bangkok or Seoul. By one-dimensional I mean that classic American Street food has mainly consisted of a few options: ice cream, hot dogs, peanuts, hamburgers, tacos, gyro/shawarma/"halal" foods (this type of street food is not exactly inspired by American tastes, but it has been appropriated as a unique part of American urban culture), and in Philadelphia’s case: the cheesesteak. By stagnant I am affirming that until relatively recently, American Street food has been resistant to change, staying firm in their product, their process, and their clientele. Street food vendors, a profession that has traditionally been occupied by first generation immigrants, have historically been tasked with nourishing America’s working class (Hauck-Lawson 2013: 38).

The connotations that were attached to these foods and their vendors were negative as far as quality and health were concerned and until the late 2000s, the public view towards street food vendors was one of skepticism and at times, contempt (probably due to the fact that most street food vendors during this point and time, and still are, first
generation immigrants). However, since 2007-08, American street food has been steadily evolving and at an incredibly rapid rate due to the appearance and growth of the gourmet food truck. There has been an ongoing transition from classic American street food, to a more contemporary, varied, and quirky manifestation of street food vendors. That being said, the evolution of American street food is not to say that gourmet food trucks are completely phasing out and replacing the vendors who are already established on the corners of American metropolises, instead they are appearing on the corners next to them and so far coexisting as another part of the urban cityscape.

One experience that I had while conducting my field research of gourmet food trucks, explicitly reified this notion of “typical” American street food and its rules and functions within society. While traversing through Philadelphia, I found myself near LOVE Park on JFK Boulevard and I noticed that food carts all of a sudden were on every corner for the next few blocks. These food carts were almost exclusively halal food carts with some manifestation of New York City in the title (New York Gyro, Big Apple Halal, etc.) with what appeared to be the same menu copied and pasted to the side of each truck. There was a gourmet taco truck and grilled cheese truck in the park nearby, but since my previous excursions had focused on the new-wave kitchens on wheels, I decided to try what was advertised to me as prototypical New York Metropolitan street cuisine to see how it matched up to my conceptions of classic “American” street food.

As I walked up to the cart titled NY Gyro, Halal Foods there was nobody in line, unlike the small queues that formed at the few other halal carts on neighboring blocks, so I figured that this would be a perfect opportunity to try and converse with the vendor. After I ordered the chicken and rice platter—which had the biggest picture on the menu with a
hand drawn "$5" layered over the image (figure 1)—I tried asking him a few questions about his cart.

Figure 1: Menu that can be found on any New York Halal Cart. Photo Courtesy: Kevin Strand

He told me he was from Pakistan and that he had only recently settled in Philadelphia, but when I began asking even more questions about his cart and how long he had it he began to reply with one word answers and it was pretty clear that he was not very interested in conversation, he was content to just give me my food and move on. He finished saucing my platter of food and packaged it up with the whole process, cooking included, taking him less than 2 minutes. However, due to the flurry of questions I surprised him with and my eagerness to eat, by the time I got back to my car I realized that I had completely forgot to pay him the $5 for the chicken and rice platter! That thought was short lived in my head though because at that moment I noticed there was a parking ticket on the hood of my car.

Now I can think of this occurrence as just incredibly bad luck/timing—especially considering the meter ran out 3 minutes before the ticket was issued—or I can think of it as
the city of Philadelphia making me pay my dues (for the price of seven chicken and rice platters) for not patiently the two minutes for my food and instead disrupting the natural flow of the street food vendor to the point where he forgot to take/I forgot to give him my money. I did not follow the customs of the “prototypical” street food experience, and I literally ended up paying for it. The chicken and rice platter was actually very enjoyable, it was just the right balance of warmth and spice, despite the fact that the chicken was oily—which was helped by the huge amount of rice in the dish. Despite the ending of the interaction, I felt like I had an adequate taste of a Philadelphia interpretation classic “American” street food experience: a cold winter day on a city block, surrounded by skyscrapers, a short impersonal conversation with the vendor, and some spicy middle-eastern “inspired” platter of food in a Styrofoam container, all in about two minutes and for the cost of a parking ticket.

It is important to at least have a concept of what constitutes an example of classic American street food before delving into an examination of gourmet food trucks—literally the new kids on the block. One of the main things that struck me about the name of the food cart, NY Gyro/Halal Foods, was the fact that just by having “New York” somewhere in the name alludes to the idea that buying food from this vendor is the closest thing to an “authentic” New York street food experience, which was exactly how it seemed.

Figure 2: New York Famous Halal logo located in University City. Photo Courtesy: Kevin Strand
Somehow the picture of a falafel stand or a gyro cart has become representative for classic, urban American street food (figure 2). The reality is that this representation is becoming outdated and limited. I am not saying that falafels and gyros are old and obsolete; they still occupy the same corners and serve the same customers that they have for years. I am saying that there has been a transition into a newer, more contemporary version of American street food represented by the gourmet food truck. These trucks which I am studying are different from the hot dog and gyro carts which have to be attached to a car, they are basically a full sized, restaurant-style kitchen on wheels that has a flashy, artistic design on the outside, a hand-written, always changing menu, and can be driven to wherever the customers are located (figure 3).

![Figure 3. A side-by-side comparison of a food cart vs. a food truck. Even though the food cart pictured is of the “gourmet” variety, the difference is apparent between a food truck and a cart that must be attached to a car. Photo Courtesy: Kevin Strand & Ryan Greenlaw](image)

The food truck surge has taken effect in Philadelphia as of 2010/11, a few years behind some of the other cities with pioneering street food culture, such as Los Angeles,
New York, and Oregon (Davidson 2013; LaBan 2011; Myint 2013). A city whose food culture is centered on traditional sandwiches such as the cheesesteak or the roast pork italiano, Philadelphia is still early in its street food evolution, but the now burgeoning Philly food truck scene is taking over the city by the block, expanding the variety of food options for the public. In this thesis I want to explore the food truck phenomenon in Philadelphia via interactions with a few of the players in the food truck industry. With my participant observations and experiences, conversational interviews with vendors and customers, and theoretical analyses, I hope to illuminate some of the factors that differentiate gourmet food trucks from other types of food vendors and recognize them as a separate entity, yet still in the same category of street food. The thesis begins with a literature review of the topics surrounding gourmet food trucks. Next is the methodology chapter where I describe the research and data collection methods I used throughout the year. In the first chapter I chose to identify two characteristics as specific to the gourmet food truck: a change in focus from convenience to quality via the presence of a restaurant trained chef, and the variety of the menus and foods served in these food trucks. I then discuss how Bourdieu’s structuralist ideas of a hierarchy of taste are broken in theory by the gourmet food truck. The next chapter describes how gourmet food trucks have ingrained themselves so much into the food system as a fresh new alternative that brick and mortar restaurants are beginning to react negatively causing a spike in street vendor regulations. Then I attempt to examine how the zoning regulations in Philadelphia contain these food trucks in areas where they can only serve a specific type of person. The third chapter offers a first-person perspective of the type of person which food trucks in Philadelphia mainly serve, the young professional, and their thoughts on the street food evolution. I finally conclude with some
ideas about food trucks progressing as a business model and their opportunities for commercialization.
Literature Review

This literature review will explore the scholarly conversations authors have written about the history of street food and its role in urban society in America (specifically New York City), the transitions away from the traditional “on the go” street food experience, the food truck as a food trend and the perceived role of social media as an integral part of these new gourmet food trucks.

Historical Perspectives of Street Food in Urban Society and New York:

The amount of scholarly work and inquiry specifically on the historical background of gourmet food trucks is actually quite limited because it is a relatively recent phenomenon. In order to have a better understanding of the historical context of these food trucks, it is important to place them in the broader category of street food. Food trucks are the newest incarnation of food that is bought and consumed in the street, but food being served out of something on wheels is a long-standing American tradition dating back to the late 1870s and the expansion into the Western United States. The American precursor to many incarnations of street food is the chuck wagon, a traveling food cart. As Reginald Horsman recounts in *Feast or Famine*,

“The chuck wagons were usually four-wheeled and drawn by horses or mules. They carried the food supplies, the cooking and eating utensils, and a water barrel...Big outfits brought their own chuck wagon that always provided dinner as a ‘big and jolly meal’...with fresh meat, bacon, whiskey, and coffee.” (Horsman 2008: 300-301).

Here he portrays the chuck wagon as a place that provides community, camaraderie, and a chance to relax for cattlemen and wagon trains while on the road. Our contemporary notions of street food are usually those of something that is “on the go” or attractive
because of its accessibility and efficiency, and not something that is heralded as a place of community building and convergence (Etkin 2009: 89). However, these new gourmet food trucks that I am studying revisit and reinvent the community building practices of the chuck wagon while keeping some of the already existing street food customs. Where American street food made the transition from a travelling chuck wagon, to stationary food stands and carts on city corners, and now to gourmet food trucks, it is now necessary to understand street food and its evolution in the urban context.

Most of the scholarly writing about street food is usually written about specific cities, and then placed in the global context. Street food can be found in cities all over the world—something that is a “uniquely urban phenomenon” (Smith 2012: 262). However, each city has a different relationship with street food because of their different histories and demographics; particular foods carry specific connotations and have specific historical contexts and social roles. Nina Etkin explains this city-specific relationship with street food in her book *Foods of Association*:

*The ways in which street foods are culturally constructed and circulated in different societies embody both enormous variety and similarities that bear on available ingredients, technology, structures of cuisine, consumption patterns, and of course, borrowing...Many cities have large immigrant populations who use these foods as a vehicle to forge identity in the Diaspora (2009: 91).*

It is important to keep this perspective in mind, especially because street food is such a widespread staple in so many cultures, but it is incredibly complex and multi-faceted that it must be studied in the milieu of one city at a time. Both Etkin and Peter D. Smith notion New York City one of the main hubs for the production and evolution of street food in
North America. Since I am focused on street food and culture from the United States, I agree that it is necessary to establish New York City as a viable reference point for the growth of food trucks because of its rich history of street food and its large and diverse population.

The ever-growing, always evolving metropolis of New York City is known as a melting pot of an incredible number of cultures all bringing their own gastronomical histories, recipes, and palates. In his book, *City: A Guidebook for the Urban Age*, Smith summarizes the history of street food in New York City starting as early as the first Dutch settlers in late 17th century with their “koekjes” (which later became known as cookies) sold on the street and reaching all the way to German immigrants in the late 1890s to the turn of the century, creating the first “hamburger steak” and Nathan Handwerker’s famous “Nathan’s hot dogs” (2012: 267-68). Smith especially highlights the fact that the street food circles in New York City have been dominated by various groups of first generation immigrants. This is a true statement, however, he does not address the fact that New York street food practices were historically classed as well—street operations were domain of the lower class—because, as Etkin mentions, “many of the vendors and consumers at the time were immigrants whose language skills precluded some forms of employment...pushcart vended foods provided some economic security at the same time as sites for cultural identity (2009: 93, Hauck-Lawson 2013: 38).” Street food provided a way for these immigrants to solidify a niche within the hustle and bustle of New York City and to this day many of the street food vendors, who have occupied the streets for decades, are still individuals with little economic resources, usually recent immigrants as well.

Today, these street food vendors are still one of the prominent signatures of New York City. The culinary landscape of street food vendors is much more varied now,
peppering the streets of New York serving up pizza, noodles, egg rolls, Middle Eastern foods, hot dogs, tacos, fresh fruit, samosas, gyros, etc (Caldwell 2011: 306, Etkin 2009: 93). Etkin makes the connection that “unlike restaurant fusions, many of the street foods of New York and elsewhere still mark discrete lines of identity...terms like melting pot do not capture the identity forging role of culture-specific public foods (2009: 94).” However, with this new form of food trucks that mostly specialize on fusion cuisine, my thesis is arguing that street food is evolving or branching out into a different manifestation; one that is very synthesized, modern, and different from the usual definitions of street food.

**Reinventing Urban Spaces and the “On the Go” Street Food Experience:**

Now that a little bit of a historical context is in place, in order to see why this street food reinvention—the gourmet food truck—has become so popular, it is necessary to understand why street food caught on so well with the identity of the urban populations of America in the first place. Sociologists and other scholars contend that the allure of street food is the fact that it consists of mainly “ready-to-eat, ready-to-drink items that are packaged in disposable containers, meant to be consumed at or while moving away from the purchase site,” (Etkin 2009: 89, Valentine 2006: 201, Smith 2012: 268). This “on the go” eating experience was and is vital to the popularization of street food, but for newer gourmet food trucks, the whole experience is very different than classic notions of cheap and quick that are normally associated with street food. In order to understand this transition, we need to have a deeper knowledge of this “on the go” experience and its implications.
In his ethnographic account of how street food has changed the public’s view of “the street” and street culture in the UK, Gill Valentine makes an assertion about eating on the move:

“Eating on the run transgresses all of the carefully constructed class, gender distinctions, and ‘normative’ constraints of manners and social graces played out over the dinner table. Alfresco eating creates unpredictable spaces of freedom for the consumer” (2006: 201).

The release of social pressure that Valentine refers to here is not specific to street food in the UK, it can be applied to other societies that already had established eating hierarchies and norms associated with private versus public setting for consuming food. This freedom he mentions resonated very well with Americans, and the fact that street food could be eaten while travelling in a car or on foot coincided exceptionally well with the rush and urgency of an urban life in America in the twentieth century.

Another place in scholarly debate where the “on the go” food experience occurs is in Michael Pollan’s popular book *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. In this book the author highlights the problems with the industrial food system in America and how it is an ingrained part of our current economy and society. He notions that the changes in farming practices have contributed to the hyper-processing of all foods in America, environmental problems, and the growth of fast food chains. At first glance it may seem like the industrial food system and the plethora of fast food restaurants would have been detrimental to the business and popularity of street food in the urban areas of the United States, but the arguments that Pollan makes actually shed some light on the reasons behind the popularity of street food and “on the go” consumption. Primarily, the rise of fast food chains and the industrial food
system was a huge contributor to the collective American desire for “on the go” consumption. Street food and fast food were both quick and easy ways to transcend the normal social norms of sitting down at a dinner table, but where it might seem that fast food would hurt street vendor business, people enjoy having alternatives to the multinational hamburger corporations (i.e. McDonald’s). People living in urban settings could take pride in the fact that they could still get an on-the-go eating experience while having a very city-specific, authentic, urban experience by eating street food.

On a similar note, in reaction to the widespread reach of the industrial food system that Pollan chastises, there has been the creation of an association called The Slow Food Movement. A proposed alternative to fast food and the industrial food system, it is an international community of almost 65,000 members who celebrate regional cuisine and local farming, headed by Carlo Petrini—editor of the book Slow Food: Collected Thoughts on Taste, Tradition, and the Honest Pleasures of Food. One article in Slow Food written by George Ritzer highlights the extensive power of McDonalds and fast food and how the Slow Food movement can combat this broad control of the market. Ritzer mentions an idea that can be applied to the scholarly discussion of street food and to my topic of gourmet food trucks:

“I have used the term ‘McDonaldization’ to describe the process by which these principles such as emphasis on efficiency, on predictable products, settings, and experiences, and on the replacement of skilled human beings with non-human technologies, have spread throughout the fast food industry, other sectors of American society, and increasingly other societies around the world (2001: 19).
I would agree that American society has definitely gone through a McDonaldization; it is another contributor to the popularity of the "on the go" eating experience and the popularity of street food and fast food. However, Ritzer goes on to point out that the Slow Food movement has the potential to be McDonaldized (2001: 22). While it is true that quality could be McDonaldized (Ritzer uses Starbucks as an example), within the context of gourmet food trucks this is not the case. The food trucks I am interested in studying seem to merge together classic concepts of street food (cheap, eaten on the street, disposable containers) with facets of the Slow Food movement (artisan ingredients, quality products, no emphasis on quickness). In this framework, instead of being "McDonaldized, Slow Food" operations, the gourmet food trucks are a hybrid in the form of "Slow Street Food," containing qualities of each.

The Gourmet food truck is something that is very hard to classify because it is a very contemporary, new phenomenon. Food trucks produce meals and snacks that are meant to be served and eaten on the street, but the experience of eating at a gourmet food truck is very different than the "on the go" eating experience of a traditional street food vendor in America. These gourmet food trucks, which usually have extravagant décor and a colorful menu, are constantly on the move throughout a city changing location daily or weekly while their chefs are constantly thinking up new cuisines and dishes to put on their ever-changing menus. The consumers are focusing more on the experience of finding the truck, waiting in line while mulling over the menu and enjoying the ambiance, and enjoying the food with the other foodies who have been standing in line with them, in other words "mobile food trucks are creating a lively, atypical experience outside of the traditional street food culture of New York City" (Caldwell 2011: 311).
To extend the idea a bit further, I would suggest that the new gourmet food trucks are actually re-inventing urban spaces that are usually associated with street food and vendors. Instead of just being a place to buy a quick bite and then move to the next destination, these gourmet food trucks with their long lines and novel designs are actually a place for community building and collective enjoyment, much like chuck wagons were in the 1870s. The food truck is “designed to bring in customers to neighborhoods they don’t normally go to and into the company of people they might not interact with,” (McCracken 2012: 160). In Anthony Myint and Karen Leibowitz’s biographical recount of opening their own food truck/restaurant, Myint narrates his observations from one of the first nights of opening the food truck,

“By the end of the night, I started to calm down. Initially, I’d felt like I needed to charm people to distract them from the stupidity of standing in line for food, but in fact, the wait was so long that people started to have real conversations among themselves...Everybody milled around chatting; I felt like a block captain, (2011: 31).”

It is interesting that while people were waiting in line they did not get angry or upset at the speed of production of the food truck. They had come to the food truck with the main priority of quality food without having to deal with a waiter and the formalities of eating in a restaurant. The focus used to be on cheap, efficient, and quick food coming from a street vendor, but now there is the gourmet option if the consumer is willing to wait among the community of fellow food truck followers.

**Food Trucks as a Food Trend and their Use of Social Media**

The last area of scholarly discussion of gourmet food trucks is how it is now assimilated into American consumer culture as a food trend and how it has done so
through the use of social media. As I mentioned before, gourmet food trucks are a relatively modern phenomenon, and their popularity has skyrocketed in a very short time period. Most of the scholars attribute this to the inclusion of social media in the production and experience of the gourmet food truck. In order to examine gourmet food trucks further from the context of food trends and social media it is necessary to mention David Sax’s book on the American consumption culture of food trends, *The Tastemakers: Why We’re Crazy for Cupcakes but Fed up with Fondue*. In this book the author makes it clear that we are in an age of food trends—that certain foods become popular overnight, and lose that popularity just as quickly. One thing that helps to shape and create food trends, Sax mentions, is called a “tastemaker” who, he defines as “anyone with the economic or cultural power to create and influence food trends, (Sax 2014: xv)”. A tastemaker is a very helpful expression to have at our disposal when discussing gourmet food trucks. The chef of a gourmet food truck is a very prominent example of a tastemaker, someone who is actively trying to come up with appealing dishes and décor and trying to create his/her own “brand”, something that is very important to the identity and popularity of gourmet food trucks (Caldwell 2011: 307). No food truck is the same and they promote their unique brands with their eccentric menus and designs, while promoting their location on twitter and social media.

In Allison Caldwell’s article about these mobile food trucks titled, *Will Tweet for Food: Microblogging Mobile Food Trucks*, her definition of these new gourmet food trucks is rooted in their use of social media. In this sense, twitter and other blogs provide a free and direct line of communication from business to consumer, without a middleman. Sang-
hyoun Pahk makes a similar notion in his article *Restaurant 2.0: Bringing Online Sociality to the Streets*, he states,

"The timing of the new street food boom coincided with the recession...but the recession didn’t just drive customers to frequent these new food trucks. The customers came as a result of the food trucks using blogs to publicize their location. Social media made new street food venture interesting (and possible) (2011: 28)."

In this sense, these gourmet food trucks are using the virtual world to their benefit in the real world. These social media sites and blogs, which are designed to create online interactions, are actually bridging the divide between virtual and actual, where ideas and conversations were happening both online and offline. As Pahk mentioned once again, “the ‘meaning’ of street food was constructed online in blog posts and tweets...what the vendors did resonated with consumers in part because the consumers made it that way through their participation online,” (2011: 30). The tastemakers are working both online and offline creating buzz for gourmet food trucks on twitter and mainstream media and the trend can only become more solidified and permanent from here.

There is evidence shown that the trend is here to stay because of the gigantic following that these food trucks have received. Along with the drastic increase in the number of food trucks in cities nationwide, there has also been the creation of organizations and websites for “Mobile Food Associations,” which help new and established food truck owners learn about and negotiate the street vending regulations and laws in certain cities. David Sax delves into the new politicization of the established food truck food trend, which has manifested due to the creation of laws against the rising numbers of gourmet food trucks (2014: 211). He is the only scholar who mentions gourmet
food trucks and food trends as a source of politicization, but I think this is a true statement that will become more apparent in the future as it becomes more obvious that gourmet food trucks are now undeniably a part of American street food culture.

**Conclusion:**

In sum, it is apparent that in our fast paced, American, consumer culture, gourmet food trucks has found their niche and established their position as a food trend powered by the use of social media online while providing an opportunity for community building unity offline. They are the newest incarnation of street food in American culture, combining qualities of traditional street food vending with the allure of the “alternative” Slow Food Movement. Despite the fact that the scholarly conversation on gourmet food trucks is relatively new and growing, this literature review provides a substantial background to the phenomenon, as well as a good framework and context in order to think about these food trucks as they evolve and sustain themselves.

My thesis is bringing together these scholars and their ideas into conversation with one another, when they normally would not have an obvious connection. For instance, both the Slow Food movement and the use of twitter have affected the popularity and the appeal of gourmet food trucks as a food trend. In the next section I will describe my research methods and data collection processes. With my ethnographic observations and interviews, I have been to get first person perspectives from street food vendors and consumers about the food truck boom in the city of Philadelphia. After describing the methods, it will finally be possible to begin the analysis of this contemporary food phenomenon.
Methodology

One of the main questions that I have about gourmet food trucks is: How did they get so popular, so quickly? Seven or eight years ago, perhaps you might have seen a lonely taco truck on a corner or a cheese steak or gyro cart serving customers on the street, but now colorfully designed food trucks with completely furnished kitchens can be found all over cities serving gourmet meals for considerably less than a sit down restaurant. They even have TV shows (The Great Truck Race, Eat St.) that showcase the best food trucks in different cities across America. Food trucks have risen to fame so rapidly, it is hard to see how they fit in to American eating culture. Are gourmet food trucks the newest evolution and manifestation of street food? What makes them different than traditional American street food practices? Are food trucks here to last in the long run? How do they benefit the consumers, the vendors, and the city they are located in? In order to gain a deeper understanding of food trucks and attempt to answer these questions I have posed, I have interviewed 8 food truck owners and vendors in Philadelphia and one from Boston to get their perspective on this unique food trend and so I can understand how food truck vendors envision themselves in their niche in the city. I also informally interviewed (sparked casual conversation with) some of my fellow consumers during participant observation. In this chapter I will talk about my initial visits to food trucks using some summaries of field notes, then I will briefly describe some possible risks and problems that could occur during the process of interviewing my subjects. Finally I will describe how my interviews occurred and how those conversations can help answer my question.
Initial Visits, Observations, Field Notes, and Tastes

My preliminary excursions to center city for the purpose of eating at food trucks were spread out over the first 6 or 7 weeks of the semester but every time I went with the purpose of sampling more than two food trucks and observing the similarities and the differences of the experience at each truck. A few of my other food truck experiences have taken place on campus, when one or more food truck has made the journey from center city Philadelphia to Swarthmore just to cater to the town or to the campus and in each of those instances (on and off campus) I have been a passive participant observer, simply ordering and eating the food and enjoying the novelty of the experience. I tended to notice a difference in clientele depending on the location of the truck and also that some areas of the city are exceptionally saturated with gourmet food trucks. I also detected that the demeanor of the vendor—whether it was happy and welcoming, cold and serious, or stressed and overwhelmed—played a big part in the experience of each food truck. Even though there are so many food trucks now on the streets of Philadelphia, each one is its own unique experience that both locals and visitors appreciate.

On my first visit to food trucks in the city, I wanted to visit two areas where trucks are known to be on every weekday. I first went to The Navy Yard in South Philadelphia where there is one spot where food trucks are licensed to operate, centered in the middle of the corporation and industry buildings. This was my first time visiting the Navy Yard, which looked like a recently developed business center filled with pharmaceutical companies, clothing manufacturers, energy companies, and a hospital. It was clear that a food truck would be there specifically to cater to all of the employees of the various companies in the Navy Yard. The food truck that was there on that Friday (Sept 5) was
Mama’s Polish Cuisine. Placed at the end of the street right before the row of company buildings began, when I approached the truck the only people waiting for their food were wearing suits and business attire or scrubs, from the hospital. Nobody was casually coming to the area; just for the food truck—like me—all of the consumers were eating it because of convenience, and proximity to the workplace.

The vendors inside of the food truck, covered in a vividly pink flower design, were two young food truck entrepreneurs wearing tie-dye shirts—not quite like the suits that were standard of their clientele—greeting every customer with a smile and working very diligently going back and forth between taking orders and working the hot grill, making the finished product of kielbasa sandwiches and pierogies. Even though it seemed most consumers were buying their food and taking it in their to-go boxes back to their office to enjoy with their co-workers, I did not follow the beaten path and I took my pierogies to a nearby bench to eat them in the sun, before going to explore more food trucks. By the time I finished my meal it was almost 1:30; the lunch hour was almost over and the amount of customers had severely dropped since I had started eating. Mom Mom’s food truck was starting to disassemble their operation since the lunch hour was their main/only source of business for the day. When I asked one of the vendors if they always operate in this location, they said no, they have a different food truck most days to provide some variety for the customers that work in the area. Overall, for most of the customers it was a quick purchasing experience, but until the end of the lunch hour, the vendors were constantly dishing out food to a steady stream of customers eager to try the food truck that was there for the day.
After the pierogies I made a trip to University City, which is known to be a hot spot for street food because of close proximity of colleges and business in the area. When I was driving down Spruce St. all of a sudden I was in a food truck haven; there were at least 8 street food vendors on every block. Some were gourmet food trucks; others were fruit stands or desert carts. I was drawn to a Caribbean/soul food food truck. After my pierogies, I just wanted a sandwich, but one of the vendors, a middle-aged African American man with an imposing voice insisted that I order a food platter because “everybody gets it and it’s just more economical”. One reason I chose this food truck was because people waiting in line and there were also people eating their food on the spot so they could talk with the people in line and to the vendors. The customers that were eating there when I ordered were 5 hospital workers, still in scrubs, who told me that they are regulars at this food truck and that the owners know them all very well. They preferred to spend their lunch break with the people preparing their lunch, instead of just taking it back to the work place and eating there. This was a more interactive, and communal eating experience; waiting for the food and eating the food was all part of the same action shared by all of the consumers in the same area. It was also interesting that this food truck had a seemingly established customer base, which the vendor was very confident that they keep returning because of the great tasting and culturally authentic food.

My second trip to the University City food truck haven was very different, I decided to try a University street food staple, one of the New York Gyro Halal food carts. The cart I chose to patronize was especially appealing to me because of its long line, yet how quickly the line was moving. While I was waiting in line, the man who ordered before me was praising the vendors on how consistent and fast they were, which was reassuring to hear.
His complements were well deserved because before I knew it, I was handed a well-packaged serving of chicken and rice and falafel with hot sauce and ushered away from the line so they could take the next order. To me, like the time I was issued a parking ticket, this seemed like the typical, 21st century American street food experience, however the steady stream of customers proved why the New York Gyro Halal food was still popular. I ended up eating my food in the car, but I still felt like I had encapsulated the entire experience.

To contrast all of the urban center city experiences, when Munchie’s food truck came to campus for our Senior Class Fall Cook-Out it was destined to be hugely popular and heavily attended. For students on a small campus in a small college town, variety of food options is simply not established. Anything that is more exciting and different than the dining hall or the local pizza place is going to be heavily appreciated and welcomed. Lots of students came to the cookout just for the food coming from the food truck, not necessarily for the social interactions. For the vendors, it was just like any other day serving hungry college students—which they do whenever they set up near Drexel, Penn, or Temple—but for the Swarthmore students it was a reason to walk out of our dorms and wait in a long line for a sandwich they could only get on that special day that the food truck arrived. It was a very different experience that eating a food truck in the city, which are a common sight and experience for people living there.

Possible Risks and Problems of Interviewing

One thing I noticed while eating and observing at various food trucks was despite the fact that many of the vendors are personable and welcoming, it is difficult to hold extended conversations with them because of the steady stream of customers or because they have to concentrate on the actual cooking and preparation of the food. If I were an
initial visit to a food truck to eat some of their food and to briefly introduce myself to the vendor, then if I choose to, I can tell them about my research and ask them if they would like being interviewed at a later time when they aren’t serving customers their food—which is what ended up happening. I do not want to interrupt the food truck business and cause customers to avoid the food truck because I am there asking a multitude of questions to the vendor.

I also was conscious of the vendor speaking about the finances and revenue of their business. I was sure to avoid make the food truck vendor uncomfortable or to force them into giving me information that they do not want to divulge. I want to keep this study focused on the person-to-person relationships negotiated via the gourmet food truck experience, and briefly touch upon economics and financial aspect of the business. I do not want to appear as if I have a financial stake in this study. I had to be aware if the vendor says something about a competitor, or themselves, that could possibly incriminate them (that they do not have a legal permit, or that they do not wash all of their cooking instruments, for example). If they were say such a thing I had to be sure to either use that information anonymously or completely void that statement and use other field notes and interviews. Overall, there were not too many risks and deterrents during my interview process, and the problems that arose were easily negotiated and solved.

**Vendor Interviews**

My plan, which I followed, was to interview these vendors and owners of food trucks for about ten or fifteen minutes outside of regular business hours, so I can have a conversation about their perception of the growing popularity of food trucks in Philadelphia. Having a chance to converse with food truck owners is important because
that way it is possible to gain a unique insider’s perspective on this prevalent food trend. By talking to these vendors, I can compare some different types of trucks: dessert trucks versus other street food, culturally authentic cuisine (Chinese, Korean, Peruvian, Indian, etc...) versus innovative and fusion cuisine, or traditional street food (Gyros, cheese steaks) versus new flashy, fusion food trucks. Since there are so many individual food trucks, it can be helpful to examine them in a comparative manner, in relation to one another.

I chose to primarily interview the owners of the food trucks before consumers because the sample size of consumers is much larger than the sample size of food truck vendors. It is very difficult to get information that is representative of all food truck consumers because it is difficult to discern what type of person would be the typical food truck customer. It has been rewarding to interview the vendors, it was refreshing to hear a an inside perspective on appeal of food trucks and their were plenty of personal anecdotes in our conversations. Some of the questions I asked the food truck owners covered topics such as: how long they have operated a food truck, the reasons why they started the operation, whether or not they had cooking experience, the types of customers they typically received, how they interact with other vendors, and how they see food trucks progressing into the future. I was also interested in how the food trucks created a brand for themselves and how they differentiate themselves from traditional conceptions of street food.

As far as choosing which food truck vendors to interview, my criteria for selection were based on whoever would be willing to speak with me. I chose the vendors to interview based on friendliness and negotiability—whether they were willing to have a conversation with me and to answer my questions. During the initial visit to the food truck
I would try to start a conversation with the vendor I want to examine further and if they were interested in talking, then I asked if they would like to answer some questions and to tell me about their experience with food trucks. I interviewed 5 vendors in the University City food truck “haven”, 2 interviews occurred at LOVE Park in Center City and one took place at the Navy Yard. The interview with the food truck vendor from Boston occurred when the owner came to Swarthmore for an on-campus panel. These food truck vendors are used to serving food to students, so they were actually very receptive to one of the student (me) interested enough in the food trucks to write a thesis on them. Many of the food trucks vendors I visited were not interested in conversation, and many times my questions seemed like a hindrance to the flow of their business and prevented them from taking and completing orders. I describe my interviewees in the following chapters as their statements pertain to the analysis.

**Who Were the Consumer Informants?**

During the process of making repeated drives into Philadelphia for field research and participant observation, I met many people who claimed that they ate at food trucks on a regular basis. In my many casual conversations with other food truck customers, two of the people whom I conversed with agreed to a more in depth interview at a later date about their food truck habits and their opinions on the growing industry. I initially met the first informant while visiting one of my recently graduated Swarthmore friends who lives in the city. The informant is a housemate of my friend and when I mentioned I was doing a thesis project on food trucks he immediately responded with a number of questions about my research so far. He then let me know that he has eaten at a food truck at least every day for the past two years, since he has been living in Philadelphia. I was slightly surprised
when he mentioned that to me; how could someone eat a food truck every single day? Do people actually do that? Food trucks have become that integral into the public’s life? If someone had told me that they eat street hot dogs or halal gyros every single day, I would definitely be shocked and I would probably be worried about their health. Before gourmet food trucks, it would be a completely far-fetched idea to eat street food every single day of the year. This informant also divulged the fact that he had another friend who also works in University City and who eats at food trucks just as much as him, if not more. Both informants go to food trucks mainly for lunch or sometimes breakfast during the workweek, and occasionally on weekends. Even though these two informants are not equally representatives of the entire population of food truck consumers in Philadelphia, their sheer amount of food truck patronage shows that they are experienced, active participants in this street food evolution.

Before interviewing my informants, I took some time to sit back and reflect on the work that I have completed and the work that has yet to be completed. I was wondering about my experience with gourmet food trucks as a student researcher at a University in a suburban area. Being restricted to living on Swarthmore’s campus, the only gourmet food truck contact I can ever achieve, without means of a car or train, is when the town of Swarthmore hosts a food truck event—like the Swarthmore Food-Truck-a-Thon—or when a student group hires a food truck to cater an event on campus. In order to accurately research such an urban phenomenon as food trucks, it is not sufficient to just collect gourmet food truck articles from internet sources; I needed go out of my way to travel into different parts of the city to immerse myself in a place where the sight of gourmet food trucks in the norm. I needed to make an effort to be a food truck consumer, because the
gourmet food trucks are not going to drive all the way to Swarthmore College every weekend just to let me research them.

However, I felt as if my gourmet street food experiences as a food truck researcher were very unusual, and not what a typical customer, or a “regular”, experiences at a food truck. First of all, most of my excursions into Philadelphia involved driving 15 miles into the city, then searching fervently for an open parking spot while avoiding traffic violations and tickets. I can guarantee that the majority of food truck patrons do not need to use a car to visit a food truck—due to the fact that they actually live in the city—therefore the appealing convenience factor of the gourmet food truck did not apply to me. However, not to be discouraged, I tried to take advantage of the convenience factor to the best of my abilities by travelling to at least three to four food trucks during each research outing. Imagine this, ordering friend dumplings with spicy soy sauce from one food truck, eating that while standing in line at a Mexican food truck where I might order three pulled pork tacos and strike up a conversation with the chef, then I would take my tacos to another yet another food truck where I order my main dish of a cheesesteak, or a sandwich of some kind. Then I would finally be able to take my bounty of tacos and sandwich back to my car where I could enjoy some of it before I drive around searching for an adequate dessert food truck to cap off the day of research. This is an excessive, yet somewhat accurate recreation of an example of a day of food truck research, but it definitely provides some context as to how atypical my food truck experiences were. How many people go to four different food trucks during their lunch break? Not many. How many people take their food back to their parked car, only to turn around and visit another food truck? Not many, unless they’re feeding more people other than themselves (which usually I was not). How many people
initiate conversations with both food truck vendors and customers, and then return to their
car to write down field notes? Not many people, unless you’re a passionate ethnographic
field researcher, as I was.

Instead, many of the people just leave work, class, or their dorm/house and just go
to whichever food truck they’re hungry for that particular day, and in places like Temple
University and the food truck haven at University City there are plenty of options. They
tend to go to food trucks within walking distance—there is no need for them to drive ten
fifteen miles and then search for parking, like me—and they usually only order from one or
two food trucks, which is much more reasonable for one person than four trucks. I came to
the conclusion that my analysis of the growth in popularity of gourmet food trucks in
Philadelphia is incomplete with just my participant observation and vendor interviews. I
needed to analyze the food truck phenomenon from a perspective of a consumer who uses
this service every single day. My atypical food truck experiences would not suffice for a
complete evaluation of a food truck consumer. When these two informants notified me that
they choose to eat at food trucks every single day of work, they seemed like the perfect
people to speak with authority and give their opinions about the emerging food truck scene
in Philadelphia.

The first of the two informants was the first one who agreed to be interviewed, the
housemate of my friend from Swarthmore. He is a white, male college graduate in his mid
twenties who lives in South Philadelphia. This informant works in a Neuroscience
laboratory at University of Pennsylvania, right in the heart of the food truck haven. He
claimed to eat food from a food truck every weekday during lunch. I first made an
acquaintance with this informant during the fall semester when visiting my friend, as I
stated previously. It was at this first meeting when he told me about the excessive number of times that he patronizes these food trucks. However, when I returned to interview him during this spring semester, he regretted to inform me that he had to drastically cut down the number of times he ate at food trucks. During a recent doctor’s visit he had been diagnosed with high blood pressure, which caused for a specific change in his diet. He said that after cutting down the amount of food trucks, his blood pressure started to crawl back down, perhaps suggesting that “gourmet” does not necessarily mean healthy—I will delve into this later. This informant also said he moved into his house to Philadelphia in 2013, when the Philly food truck scene was in its adolescence. The food trucks have always been a part of Philadelphia life for this informant, so he has always had access to this plethora of food options right outside of his office door. This informant labeled Aladdin Foods, Lin’s, and Don Memos as a few of his favorite food trucks.

The other informant who agreed to a later interview was a friend recommended to me by the first informant. He is yet another white, male college graduate in his mid twenties who works in a biology laboratory at University of Pennsylvania. This informant maintained that he ate at food trucks every weekday at lunch, most mornings for break fast and sometimes on the weekends after a bar. This informant did not have any of the same health concerns that plagued the first informant, despite the fact that he consumes more gourmet food truck cuisine than the first interviewee. This informant lives in West Philadelphia and has been there for two years, so the gourmet food truck scene has been present for the time he has lived in the city. He is originally from Portland, Maine, a small city that is even newer to the gourmet food truck evolution than Philadelphia, so street
food is a relatively new option for this informant. Some of his favorite food trucks that he
identified are: CaliMexi, Lin’s, and Nick’s Peruvian Cart.

Both of my informants were interviewed in the first informant’s house—where my
friend from Swarthmore lives. This provided a casual environment where everybody
involved was comfortable, and we could have an extended conversation if necessary. This
also allowed both informants to be interviewed at the same time in a manner where I
would pose a question, and either informant could reply to my questions or each other’s
responses as they wished. During the middle of the interview we decided to take a walk to
a nearby food truck to appropriately nourish ourselves with the product I am investigating
so deeply. This food truck was called Tacos El Rodeo, one of the few food trucks
consistently located outside of the normal Philadelphia food truck areas (University City,
LOVE park, Temple University, etc...). I ordered a delectable torta con bistec, which is an
oversized sandwich with tender slices of marinated beef, with crisp lettuce, a slice of
tomato and avocado each, a squeeze of lime, and pickled carrots all between a soft
sandwich bun. Judging by how quickly this torta filled me up, it was definitely well worth
the $6.50 with a soda. This food truck stays in this location in South Philly 7 days a week
open from noon until midnight. They stay open so consistently since they are located in a
high population density area with an active nightlife scene. After enjoying the fruits of this
food truck’s labor, we became rejuvenated and ready to finish the rest of the interview.

In hindsight, it seems problematic that both of my informants are so similar to each
other. Since both of the interviewees work in a laboratory at University of Pennsylvania
and they are both white, college graduates in their mid-twenties, it may seem like there is a
lack of depth in my choice of informant. This can be attributed to the difficulties of asking
random people who were standing in line at food trucks with me to agree to a longer interview at a later date. Those conversations were comparative to something such as small talk instead of formal interviews, lasting two minutes at the most. It is more logical and socially acceptable to schedule an interview from an acquaintance or somebody you know that is willing to make time for the questions as opposed to a random stranger on the street. Despite the fact that I was not able to interview any hospital workers, students, construction workers, or anybody else, my choice of informants—two people who survive off of gourmet food trucks—can still be recognized as a valid selection since the mass amount of street food they consume proves their status as active participants in the Philadelphia street food scene.

**How can this help?**

Performing casual interviews has proven to be fruitful and useful in answering my questions about the popularity of food trucks. The unique perspective of a food truck vendor—an active participant in the food truck industry—is valuable in describing how the vendor makes their product appealing and attractive to the public. Interviewing a food truck owner has endless possibilities as far as being applicable to this research project. Additionally, interviewing a few consumers would extend the research to both sides of the food truck business. These semi-structured interviews can help me understand how the food truck phenomenon is viewed in the public eye and what kind of person I could expect to find eating at a food truck. With both of these interviewing methods, it will be easier to understand what factors of gourmet food trucks appeal to the public, and how the vendors have been capitalizing on this newfound popularity.
Chapter 1 – Raising the Stakes with the New “Kids” on the Block

Quality

After going to just one of these gourmet food trucks, a Korean fusion truck to be exact, something became very apparent to me after my first bite of my spicy pork and bulgogi wrap: this food was GOOD. The Korean woman inside the truck who took my order insisted that I ordered the bulgogi wrap because, in her words, “its most popular, because it tastes best!” She was right, of course, and I could not have been happier with my purchase. At that point in time (since this was my first trip to a food truck), I had decided that bulgogi wrap very well could have been the best snack I have bought off the street in any city in America. However, that notion raised some questions for me: Why were food trucks called “roach coaches” until the recent past (Abutaleb 2014; Mayyasi 2013)? How could something that good come out of something that used to be called a “roach coach”? Does street food really taste better now than it has in the past? Is taste one of the priorities when choosing to buy food from a street vendor? What makes these trucks “gourmet”? It will be difficult to arrive at concrete answers to these questions, but it is important to understand how differences in taste apply to something with such a unique, and socially classed history, like street food.

As I previously pointed out in the literature review, American street food has been historically classed, providing nourishment for the immigrant, working class, and low-income population in urban megacities (Caldwell 2012: 306; Pahk 2011: 30). As P. D. Smith points out, “street food’s timeless appeal is that it is cheap and convenient: for many low income workers and students, the first meal of the day is bought from a street stall and eaten while travelling to work or school” (2012: 262). The most recent manifestations of
American street food are adding quality and great taste to that list of appeal. No longer are the days of the “roach coach”, instead they are replaced with conceptions of the artisanal, innovative, and gourmet food truck. It is interesting to use the word gourmet to describe this new wave of mobile vendors, because gourmet has connections and connotations to class, just like the adjective “street”, only in a different way.

“Gourmet”, is a term used to describe specialty food and refined and elaborately prepared cuisine. The word adds a Bourdieu-like aspect to the study of food trucks in that it inherently connects class and food preferences and taste as a marker of distinction (Bourdieu: 1984). In his ethnographic and statistical analysis of French consumption patterns and culture, Bourdieu contends that taste is a social construction and that a hierarchy of taste is reflective of the existing class hierarchy. This clearly applies to the case of dining out in the United States; fine dining restaurant have been known to provide the expensive, multi-course, decorative food to be aesthetically enjoyed, as well as eaten, by the upper class, and the street vendors are who provide the convenience and the reliability to sustain the working class. Now that “gourmet” has molded together with street food, food vendors are producing a version of haute cuisine—defined as cuisine of high level establishments and inspired by gourmet restaurants in France, which is known to be meticulously prepared and expensive—at a reasonable price and in a much more casual and public setting.

The gourmet street food phenomenon is benefitted by the general change in demands of what Americans—especially the middle class—want to eat. The term foodie—which is somebody who genuinely cares and enjoys good food—has been known to be another marker of class distinction, suggesting that good food translates to expensive,
fancy meals. Despite this connotation, with the popularization and glamorization of cooking channels and chefs, American popular culture has embraced the idea of a foodie and redeveloped to indicate someone who enjoys taking part in an “omnivorous affair” of choosing what to eat (Johnston & Baumann 2010: xx). Considering this popularization of food culture and the public’s greater recognition of certain health and environmental problems associated with the industrial food system (childhood obesity, diabetes, factory farming, etc.), which was helped by production of books such as *The Omnivores Dilemma* and Movies like *Supersize Me* and *Food Inc.*, it is safe to assume that there has been a rise in demand from the average American consumer for an alternative to the industrial food system, for something that tastes good and is healthy.

So how do the gourmet food trucks manage to prepare restaurant quality food without the restaurant? First of all, the quality of their ingredients is at the top of the line. As a Philadelphia gourmet burger truck vendor stated in an interview for the Philly Inquirer, “We’re...not the trucks and carts of yesterday serving cheesesteaks out of a package onto a grill, We’re making things from scratch,” (LaBan 2011). By comparing himself to the classic cheesesteak vendors, the burger truck owner condemns them for using processed foods, which immediately decrease the allure, instead of fresh, quality ingredients. He also mentions the lack of artisanal techniques from the cheesesteak vendors, “making things from scratch,” which ideally is one of the factors that takes the extra step towards a higher quality. There are food trucks in Philadelphia and Boston whose premise is their devotion to local foods and small-scale farm productions; one of the vendors whom I interviewed is planning to open her farm-to-table inspired truck, called Fresh Food Generation, next year in Boston. The commitment to using quality, locally
sourced ingredients is a newfound characteristic, something that has not been typically associated with street food.

Another important facet of gourmet food trucks that upgrades their quality of food is the presence of an experienced chef with knowledge of those “artisanal” techniques mentioned earlier. Every vendor with whom I spoke stressed the importance of having at least one, if not two people with considerable experience in the restaurant business. The general consensus seemed to be that working in a food truck is by all means an extremely difficult job that is also incredibly unsustainable without any food service experience. Developing an innovative, changing menu based on available ingredients is something that can be easily performed by someone who has experience combining flavors and cuisines. For instance, there is the comparison of the “cookie-cutter” menu of the New York Halal food cart, usually operated by a first-generation immigrant trying to make enough to live, next to the malleable, seasonal-inspired menu of a Farm-to-Table truck created by an executive chef who might have left their previous restaurant job to pursue their own food interests and intellectual freedom. Having a practiced chef on board a food truck is helpful for rapid food preparation, general cooking knowledge, and operation of a food service business.

In my conversations with the vendors, the main factor that the truck owners kept attributing to their success was the presence of an experienced chef behind the counter doing the preparation and designing of the menu. For a day of fieldwork I decided I would sample some gourmet food trucks at two different locations: the Naval Yard business center in South Philadelphia (a different time than mentioned in the Methodology chapter), and LOVE Park in center city. The Navy Yard puts together a monthly rotation of various
gourmet food trucks to cater to the plethora of businesses, corporations, and office
buildings that make up the business center. This rotation lasts from the summertime
(around the beginning of May) to the first week of November. I went on the last day of the
rotation around 1:30 hoping to catch whichever truck would be there at the end of the
three-hour lunch shift (11-2) as they were closing to see if I could ask them a few questions
without interrupting their business. After searching from corner to corner of the massive
grid of side streets within the Navy Yard, I finally caught eye of two men shutting down
their freshly painted barbecue food truck. When I walked up to their operation, I began
talking to the younger of the two food truck vendors, asking him about the truck and how
long he has had it. Before I had asked two questions, the other vendor, an older man in
about his sixties, took over the conversation and began answering all of my questions to a
lavish extent. After asking about how long he had the food truck and how he got the idea, he
said:

"Well, we’re originally from Indiana, and I started working in finance for a
pharmaceutical company while my son (who was not the other vendor present) worked as a
chef in different restaurants for about 15 years. After awhile I was transferred out here to
Philadelphia and about a year ago my son proposed this idea [the truck] to me and told me to
quit my job to help with the business aspect of the truck. I thought he was crazy, but I agreed
because he was so confident, and now we have had this truck for about a little less than a
year, I think. Now so far, I love it, we get all sort of people like yourself having conversations
with us about our food trucks and people usually want to start their own food truck. The first
thing I tell them is that you will not survive in this business without someone who knows food."
Thank goodness my son has 15 years of restaurant experience, I mean, who do you think creates the menu? That’s all him, you know that I couldn’t do that if I tried.”

Now, from the owner’s response we can truly understand a firsthand perspective of the importance of restaurant experience in operating a food truck. The real mastermind behind the quality of the food is often the chef who designed the theme of the food truck, the unique menu, and the different ingredients to use in the dishes. They possess the knowledge of flavor combinations and stress the importance of quality of ingredients. The gourmet food trucks and their restaurant quality chefs provide a stark contrast to the “dirty water” hot dog and ice cream sandwich vendors of our nostalgic street food past. Along the same line, during the same day of fieldwork, another conversation I had with a food truck vendor and her two college-aged employees, this one at the LOVE park location. The vendor who I spoke to was an energetic young Asian-American woman who revealed she had been in the catering/restaurant business for 6 years after graduating from culinary school. The truck she was operating was a taco truck, which featured tacos inspired by different culinary traditions from around the world. The vendor also divulged that this was the second truck she had in operation and that both had been in existence for less than two years. Aside from the importance of her past in catering, she expressed the fact that her second truck was thoroughly planned out by her and another friend who was a chef. They knew exactly what kind of food to make, how to make it en masse, how to price, and who to sell it to. This type of confidence in the food industry definitely comes as a result of being a successful chef in other kitchens. When I asked her for her opinion on what attracted people to her truck, she responded:
"I think its definitely for the good food, people come here with the priority of having really awesome tasting food... otherwise they would go to the halal guys or someone else because they are looking forward to fill up,"

Her response further validates the importance of culinary experience but at the same time directly attributes the quality of her food as a result of that culinary experience and knowledge. For both of these vendors, they are combining qualities of fine dining (quality ingredients, restaurant chef) within the setting and context of the city streets. This notion rejects the structuralist philosophy of a hierarchy of taste introduced by Bourdieu, which would suggest that street food and fine dining belong to different social strata and will remain separate. Instead, we can more accurately apply a more dynamic viewpoint, provided by Stephen Mennell in his book *All Manners of Food*. In this book Mennell asserts that there is the possibility of 'diminishing contrasts' of food related habits and beliefs and he goes on to give an example stating, “Contrasts have diminished between elite professional cookery and everyday cooking: peasant dishes have been absorbed into haute cuisine...the social stratification of eating-places has become still more blurred in the late twentieth century,” (qtd. in Wood 1995: 35). Despite the elitist undertones of Mennell, he provides an applicable theory to the food truck phenomenon. Gourmet food trucks are a very concrete example of merging aspects of both a restaurant experience and a street food experience to create a new, dynamic, changing street food vendor dispensing restaurant quality options at an affordable price while transcending social boundaries attached to the varying quality of food.
Variety

Having an experienced chef on the staff of a food truck operation not only improves the quality of the food and the efficiency of production, but it also promotes individualism, innovation, and creativity since the vendors have a desire to make a name for themselves among the multitude of new food trucks. The innovation of chefs produces a mixture of culinary traditions from all over the world—like the taco truck I visited in LOVE Park—which turns into a massive variety of options for hungry customers to peruse over and choose from. Despite Philadelphia’s infancy in the food truck wave, there are already established food trucks offering cuisine ranging from southern soul food to Peruvian inspired cuisine and even gourmet macaroni and cheese trucks to trucks that specifically serve desserts such as macaroons or cookies. This wide variety of food trucks appears to be another manifestation of what Claude Fischler and Michael Pollan describe as the Omnivore’s Paradox, or the Omnivores Dilemma, respectively (Fischler 1988: 277). This paradox/dilemma suggests that whenever there is a freedom of food choice and preference, there becomes the need for a varied diet to collect all necessary nutrients. This is true in the case of food trucks as well, thanks of the wide variety of options there is the increased allure in the idea of “trying them all” and the possibility of growing weary of a single type of food. This reality is another stark contrast to the ideas of American street food in the recent past, which hardly ever stepped away from conventions such as hamburgers, hot dogs, and pretzels.

One of the primary locations of my fieldwork was the ten-block area along Chestnut and Walnut Street near University City and the Drexel University campus. When driving into this area as soon as you cross 40th street, you are immediately struck by the presence
of full sized food trucks of all types and smaller food carts lining the blocks of almost every corner and street ahead. Some of the designated food truck locations, such as the Navy Yard, The Porch at 30th Street station, and LOVE Park, have a rotating schedule of food trucks but the area at University City always has mainly the same food trucks in generally the same location day after day. The owner of barbecue food truck revealed to me that there is a lottery system for the spaces in such popular areas like around Drexel, Temple and University of Pennsylvania. Evidently, the prospect of a constant stream of business from the vast population of students and the various office buildings in the area makes that section of University City a prime location for a gourmet food truck. A Drexel student who I spoke to in line while waiting at a Vietnamese food truck—who claimed that he has eaten at a food truck at least 4 times a week—described the food truck haven as “anything you could have ever wanted, right outside your door!”.
This is an accurate description of the group of blocks, which helps affirm the presence of a
great variety of options of Street food in Philadelphia (figure 4). Whenever I conducted
research in this food truck haven, I was able to visit a halal cart, a Peruvian food truck, a
taco truck, and a bagel cart all in the same trip and another time I visited a Korean truck, a
soul food truck, a cookie truck, and a coffee cart. The combinations of flavors are endless
which proves to be beneficial for a public with a rapidly growing palate.

The variety of options is present on both a small scale, as in the case of the taco
truck featuring pork belly kimchi tacos, and tacos al pastor with pineapple salsa, and on a
large scale with the plethora of food trucks in the “food truck haven” of University City. In
addition, the previously mentioned taco truck owner operates another food truck in which
the theme is to provide tastes of street food from all over the world—with a menu
consisting of various sandwiches such as Vietnamese bahn mi’s, meatball sandwiches, and
hamburgers. Stephen Mennell is once again applicable since he reaffirms this transition
into variety by stating, “changes in dietary culture over several centuries have led to
increasing varieties,” (1985). Roy Wood in the Sociology of the Meal expands on this idea
stating that,

"even stylized French cuisine has not escaped this process... French Haute cuisine has
been in some way displaced from the apex of the hierarchy of food styles, a hierarchy that has
been somewhat substantially leveled...To some extent it is true that connotations of
‘Frenchness’ and ‘haute cuisine’ have been diluted as a result of the increasing association of
‘top’ cuisine with individual chef practitioners. Chefs (or some chefs at least) are more than
ever ‘superstars’ using their access to books, television, and radio as vehicles for prompting
This idea of a leveling of hierarchy is explicitly evidenced just by having “tastemakers” such as celebrity chefs, food truck owners, and food bloggers describing contemporary American street food with adjectives such as gourmet and haute, two words derived from French to signify a distinction in taste. The fact that there is now a varied spectrum of cuisines available without having to enter a brick and mortar restaurant further reifies the evolution that has taken place within American street food. Now in the already widely varied foodscape of Philadelphia, these food carts providing “classic” street food just become another set of options among the others provided by the gourmet food trucks.

Conclusion

An improvement in food quality and an expansion in variety are not the only factors contributing to the popularity of gourmet food trucks, but they are two defining factors that differentiate these gourmet food trucks from classic conceptions of street food. The presence of an experienced chef and the general public’s desire for a higher quality of food reject Bourdieu’s structuralist ideas of a stratified taste hierarchy, and gourmet food trucks assume a liminal position, straddling the once distinct boundary between upper class, restaurant fine-dining, and the convenience and speed of the working class street food experience. It is much more illuminating to view American food culture as a dynamic process and constantly changing with influences coming from many different places.

Interestingly enough, the vendors who I conversed with seemed to imagine themselves in a completely different light and level than the street vendors that have been around Philadelphia for years. For instance, when I asked the owner of the barbecue truck what made his truck and other new ones different than the old guard of food carts of
Philadelphia, he replied very succinctly, “We’re cleaner. The guys who have been there on those corners for 15 years aren’t even competition, I wouldn’t eat their food. I mean, where do they put the waste water?” The taco truck owner did not hold as much contempt towards the hot dog and halal carts, but she said, “We serve clients for a completely different reason, people come for our tastes, they go to the others to get a quick bite.” On the other hand, I exchanged a few words with a vendor who owned a cheesesteak cart in University City for 30 years. He did not seem to mind the gourmet food invasion when he stated, “I’ve been here for so long with this cart and seen so many changes but business hasn’t been so bad since these new trucks appeared in force. I still have my regulars who I have been recognizing for years who come for my steaks so I’d say its always been pretty constant”. As opposed to the gourmet food truck owners, who envisioned themselves as the alternative of the typical street food, this cheesesteak cart vendor seemed to pay no mind to the “alternative”. His business was still thriving after all of these years from providing the authentic, comforting street food experience that the consumers are used to. From these statements it is clear that these gourmet food truck vendors envision themselves as a different version of street food, ready to make their mark alongside the already established food carts as independent street food vendors and provide restaurant quality food without the extra frills of a fine dining establishment.
Chapter 2 – From Food Trend to Valid Business Model

After tasting the food at any of the food trucks found in America, one can understand and be an active part in the shift occurring in American street food culture towards these new food trucks. Some of the factors I previously stated that set new gourmet food trucks apart from classic street vendors bring some aspects of a restaurant experience out into the street—such as a restaurant trained chef & quality ingredients. However, to state the obvious, eating at a food truck is nowhere near the same experience as dining out in a Michelin star restaurant, or even at a local Applebee’s. After exploring some of the fine dining and gourmet aspects of the gourmet food trucks, which help set them apart from their hot dog and gyro-vending counterparts, I now seek to examine some of the differences between a food truck and a brick & mortar restaurant. In my research and during my observations I found there to be a recognition by the food truck vendors of some animosity from local restaurants and businesses towards food trucks in many cities (Philadelphia, Washington, Chicago, etc...) and that those tensions and hostilities tend to translate into political battles and legal regulations. After analyzing the close relationship between gourmet food trucks and brick and mortar restaurants, I then would like to delve into a few of the aspects specific to the on the street experience of eating at a gourmet food truck and how these affect the new established industry. Lastly, I chose to look at a feature particular to the gourmet food truck, its mobility and ease of transportation, and how this facet allows for new profitable opportunities in the form of food truck events and catering.

Brick & Mortar Tensions

Until now, dining out has been understood as a social phenomena that occurs when a group of people opt to travel away from the home to enjoy a communal meal amongst
other groups of strangers in a building where food is served—called a restaurant. With the introduction of options like take-out/pick-up orders, delivery, and now gourmet street food, dining out has been redefined as eating any meal that was not cooked in the home. In other words, people no longer need to go to a brick & mortar establishment in order to successfully “dine out”. Previously, street food was always in the periphery of the American restaurant scene in major cities. The street food vendors were always stationed on the street corners, but they had a specific purpose, to provide quick, cheap nourishment on the go with no extra cost. They did not have flashy, decorated trucks with full sized restaurant style kitchens in them, nor were they dishing up meal sized portions of lobster mac-n-cheese or something unique like Korean pork bulgogi tacos. Instead, they were handcarts that populated the city streets offering snacks like pretzels and ice cream for children and tourists, or late night food (tacos, cheesesteaks, etc.) for the bar crowds. Restaurants and street vendors had different clientele and even though they are both technically a part of the same consumer market, restaurants have traditionally tended to turn a blind eye to street vendors, to act as if they were not there since they were not seen as competition.

As I have pointed out earlier in this thesis, in the last 6-8 years or so, street food has evolved and advanced in a rapid manner. Concurrent with the shift in focus on using higher quality ingredients and producing higher quality cuisine from street vendors and with the growth of popularity of food trucks, there has been a backlash from local restaurants and other businesses in numerous cities which feel that these new gourmet food trucks are encroaching on their business model in numerous ways (Jennings 2012; Sax 2014; Myint 2011). Around 2008/2009 the food truck phenomenon was in its infancy and the laws
concerning street food were outdated as they mainly were concerned with selling permits for an, ideally, stationery food cart vendor. There were no laws in any city telling food truck operators where and when they could sell, as long as they had a legal permit to sell foodstuffs. Food truck owners with viable permits could park their trucks outside of bars, or in tourist areas, or wherever they decided and if they were asked to move by the authorities, then they could easily pack and secure their ingredients and then move to another location. For example, in their book *Mission Street Food*, Karen Leibowitz and Anthony Myint recount the story of buying an old taco truck and revamping it to cook and sell Chinese food in their residential neighborhood on Mission Street. Their first three nights of service proved to be harrowing, yet profitable but on the fourth night while they had a forty person line waiting for food, a local real estate business owner aggressively confronted them saying that they need to shut down because of the amount of trash and waste the food truck generated and the noise coming from the people waiting in line. When the police arrived they checked the truck’s permits and it seemed to pass inspection, yet the next day the couple were told that their permit was actually not valid, so they had to shut down their truck and look for an alternative (Myint 2011: 27). Even though they ended up having to shut down their food truck, this anecdote provides good a concrete example of how lax the regulations concerning food trucks were and how the gray areas of the laws contributed to anger and backlash from other local businesses.

However, one thing about outdated laws with legal loopholes is that they provide a good blank canvas for new rules and regulations. Shortly after food trucks appeared on the urban food scene, business coalitions began to work with city governments to decide upon laws applicable to gourmet food trucks. Because the old mobile vending laws in cities
tended to be written on the assumption that the street vendors were stationery while selling his/her goods or were placed only around construction sites and tourist areas, these new food trucks—which are no longer just carts, but full fledged trucks with a kitchen—could set up shop anywhere they deemed most profitable. In essence, it was a spatial free-for-all for these gourmet food trucks in cities across America. Restaurant coalitions and other business began to lobby for rules and regulations against the rogue, unleashed food trucks (Cowen 2013:77). Most of the complaints coming from restaurants and businesses were similar to complaints Anthony Myint and Mission Street Food received, including food trucks producing trash, poaching restaurant customers during peak hours, creating noise and crowds, and taking parking spaces from paying customers. By 2010 cities such as Washington D.C., Seattle, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and St. Louis all had laws restricting food truck operations within a certain proximity of eating or drinking establishments or controlling the hours that a food truck was allowed to operate (Needleman 2012, Gan 2014).

In some of these cities, these regulations almost eradicated the prospect of food trucks. David Sax writes about the political battle between the restaurant lobbyists and the food truck community of Washington D.C. in his book, The Tastemakers. He notions that many of the laws proposed by the city council included numerous fines and payments that, in total, would put any food truck out of business before they could even start (Sax 2014: 228). In these cities with strict guidelines such as Washington D.C., opening a food truck all of a sudden became an incredibly risky venture thanks to the wide reaching power of the state. In response, food truck vendors believed that they “shouldn’t be punished for offering an innovative service, especially since many cities allow restaurants to open next
to each other,” (Needleman 2012). In order to combat the passage of these intense laws, there was a need for solidarity among food truck owners who were feeling the full negative effects of the regulations, such as police harassment or a multitude of expensive tickets. Despite these grim prospects, most of the cities with prohibitive street food laws followed after the example of the Los Angeles food truck scene where the first food truck trade association was formed in 2010, The Southern California Mobile Food Vendors Association (SCMFVA), in order to establish a firm platform against the lobbyists trying to outlaw street vendors (Sax 2014; Gan 2014). Several cities gained influence from this example and created their version of a food truck alliance, for example the Philadelphia Mobile Food Association was created in 2012 to help negotiate zoning laws with policy makers and to connect food truck owners with their colleagues. In this way, policymakers now have to deal with an industry association rather than the scattered voices of lone entrepreneurs.

Currently the Philadelphia laws are on a street-by-street basis, with certain neighborhoods and areas off limits to food truck vending. Areas in Center City with high concentration of restaurants are completely devoid of food trucks as are the lower income neighborhoods in Northern Philadelphia, but business areas and tourist parks such as the Navy Yard and LOVE Park have seasonal food truck schedules and other certain streets open up their metered parking for food truck business. In my conversations with food truck operators, I found that in the “food truck haven” that I identified around University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University campuses, there is a lottery for the parking meters on 38th, Spruce, and other nearby adjacent streets. Here most of the food trucks occupy the same space day after day for normal street selling days. The large amount of foot traffic in this area on a daily basis makes each parking spot on the street profitable. However, these
food truck concentrations are few and far between; the rest of the city is sparsely populated with street food except on specified a few corners and avenues. This street-by-street system, which Philadelphia employs, restrains gourmet food trucks to these areas around colleges and businesses that in turn causes their main demographic to be either a young professional or a young college student. The truth is that only a fraction of the city has direct access to these gourmet food trucks, so the food is tailored for the people living in these parts of the city—which happen to be the younger generation of middle class college graduates moving into Western Philadelphia. Instead of George Bieber, president of the PMFA is currently making an effort to combat some of these laws to expand the available food truck real estate to places that “really don’t have an active, happening scene” (Gan 2014). Ideally, the regulations would allow gourmet food trucks to operate all over the city, catering to all citizens instead of localized in one section of city blocks. However, the restaurants exercise their political power because they are still defensive of their high-rent real estate and believe that food trucks are detrimental to their business model.

Ironically, in some cities, not all brick and mortar restaurants antagonize gourmet street vendors. Some opportunistic restaurateurs recognize the versatility, the novelty, and the publicity potential of the new gourmet food truck craze. Whereas many aspiring chefs try open a food truck as a precursor to a brick and mortar restaurant, a select number of restaurants have began to operate a food truck as well to expand their business. An established brick and mortar restaurant already has valuable business experience and knowledge—something that new food truck owners seek—and they already (ideally) would have enough money to make a small capital investment on a food truck. In New York City, one example of this is the famous Papaya King hot dog restaurant. A NYC staple for 80
years, the Papaya King has been serving their signature hotdogs and fresh fruit juices from their brick and mortar establishment for the greater part of the last century. In November of 2014, the Papaya King established and introduced a mobile kitchen as an extension of their traditional restaurant. It is noteworthy that amongst all the tensions between brick and mortar restaurants and gourmet food trucks, some of the restaurant owners are accepting the presence of the new version of street food and they even approach the idea with a “when in Rome” attitude.

In Philadelphia, amongst the food truck haven, there is one unassuming taco truck on 38th Street, near Drexel, which constantly has people sitting on plastic fruit crates waiting for their $2 tacos. This truck, called Don Memo, always has a long queue in front of it and they serve scrumptious, authentic Mexican foods including tacos al pastor and tortas (a large Mexican style sandwich). I could not turn away from the alluring smells of pork and steak searing on the grill, so I decided to jump in line and order some food. While I was waiting for my three tacos al pastor I began to talk to the operator inside sautéing the pork for my tacos. He did not feel like conversing too much with me because of the long line of people giving him more orders or waiting for their food, but he did reveal the fact that the Don Memo restaurant—which was where the truck originated—had actually closed fairly recently, so the taco truck was the last surviving part of their business franchise. With some further research, I found that the Don Memo truck had been operating since their restaurant opened in 2008, and on June 8th, 2013 the Don Memo Mexican Restaurant brick and mortar was forced to close due to lease issues (Moroz 2013: The Daily Pennsylvanian). In this case, here is a brick and mortar restaurant that is currently sustaining itself with its food truck business. The restaurant has yet to reopen, however the taco truck always
boasts a long line and wait every single day of operation. Food trucks and brick and mortars do not always have to oppose each other and bring legal battles to each other, food trucks can prove to be a profitable option for a restaurant, or in the case of Don Memo, the food truck can be a lifeline.

Undoubtedly, one of the main factors that contribute both to the food truck’s popularity and to the animosity of the brick and mortars towards food trucks is the relatively low startup cost for a food truck business. Essentially, there is no fixed rent cost as there is for any brick and mortar restaurant. Tyler Cowen suggests, in his book *An Economist Gets Lunch*, that paying rent is one of the most difficult, initial stepping stones of a new restaurant and that most new restaurants close within three years because they cannot make enough money to pay the rent for their location (2013: 72). However, the cheap startup costs allow for a low risk opportunity. The minor initial costs of starting a food truck are attractive to people recently out of a job—due to the 2008 recession or for other reasons—or for those who cannot afford other increasingly expensive paths such as college or culinary school. With less financial restrictions on the gourmet mobile food business, the food truck doors are open for an entrepreneurial spirit and innovative ideas that may not otherwise be as well received in brick and mortar restaurants.

**An Outdoor Experience**

Another glaring difference between the gourmet food truck and the brick and mortar restaurant is the contrasting ambiance and eating experience. A restaurant is an environment filled with many social and cultural connotations and phenomena. Restaurants “bring together nearly all the characteristics of economic life studied by sociologists and anthropologists—forms of exchange, modes of production, symbolism
behind consumption...many of the concepts used to define cultural worlds—such as the
distinction between domestic and private life, or the rules surrounding relationships with
kin or strangers—are challenged in restaurants,” (Beriss & Sutton 2007: 1). This plethora
of social and cultural interaction is what one would commonly call the added “frills” of
going out to a restaurant. This is not to say that eating at a food truck is completely devoid
of social interaction and cultural negotiation. Instead, the premise of street food has always
been cheap, easy to prepare food that is quick and convenient that will fill your stomach
without the additional formalities—the social and cultural “frills”. However until now, the
quality of street food, especially in America, severely lagged behind the quality of food
coming out of the majority of restaurants. The difference between the two has always been
a difference in intention, brick and mortars are intended for a formal dining experience—which in theory is centered high quality or gourmet cuisine—whereas street food is
intended for a much more informal purpose. Now, gourmet food trucks operate on the
premise of quick, accessible, cheap, and great quality ready-to-serve dishes yet still excluding the “frills” and added embellishments that come with being physically inside of a restaurant.

However, an outdoor eating establishment has its fair share of “outside” factors that just simply do not apply to a brick and mortar restaurant. A gourmet food truck, as is any
street vendor, is completely open to the elements of the city. To make up for the low rent
costs, food truck owner/operators must worry about the authorities (laws and regulations
such as parking, littering, permits, etc...), proximity to residential areas, and the weather.
The street food business is notoriously seasonal and cyclical because of its open air set up,
especially in the northeastern United States, which is known for its cold temperatures and
snowstorms. In my conversations with an organic food truck owner from Boston, she made
it very clear that the food truck business is greatly affected by Mother Nature, especially in Massachusetts with their humid summers and long winters. For cities in the northeast, in the South, and the Midwest, the best time of year for the food truck business is the late spring—before the summer gets too hot—and the early fall. The food truck owner from Boston divulged that the food truck business certainly dies down during the winter months due to car issues, lack of foot traffic, and snow. Without a brick and mortar restaurant providing shelter it can be difficult for a food truck operator to keep steady business when the weather keeps interrupting the flow of customers.

However, during my research of the street food scene in Philadelphia I found that volatile weather does little to hinder the thriving gourmet food truck scene. Unlike the hotdog carts and ice cream carts of years passed, which usually had the vendor standing next to their cart under an umbrella; the new gourmet food trucks are basically kitchens within the shelter of the truck, shielded from the rain and precipitation. As one Philadelphia dessert truck owner mentioned to me:

“its basically a climate controlled environment in here, and by climate controlled, I mean controlled by the climate from outside. No matter how hot or cold it is outside, you can bet it’s the exact same in here, except claustrophobic. And since I make desserts, I can only imagine what its like to be standing over a flattop grill in a cramped truck in the dead of summer ...but at least we don’t get rained on”.

This owner gave the impression that climate affected business (via temperature) yet still provided enough shelter and protection to continue vending when the weather was less then ideal; he never suggested that the temperature issues were too extreme to cause the truck to cease operation. Additionally, in my observations, rainy conditions never did much
to hinder the foot traffic by these food trucks in Philadelphia. On the few rainy days I chose to do research, one of the first things I noticed was that people (mainly students, near Drexel) would still stand in line to wait for their food at numerous food trucks. Now an established business model, gourmet food trucks are less affected by the weather, especially rain and light precipitation, which normally would discourage people from patronizing street food vendors.

In order to grasp a better understanding of how extreme temperatures affect the food truck industry in Philadelphia, during the late fall I asked a few food truck operators if they would be open during the winter months. One of the taco trucks I mentioned in a previous chapter—run by an Asian-American woman who worked in a restaurant/catering business beforehand—told me they would only close during the winter months because the owner maintains more than one food truck, and since the taco truck is not the most popular one that she runs, it is more profitable to close that truck during the winter months. In other words, the owner loses money by keeping all of their food trucks open because the outside temperature influences the amount of customers, not the food truck operations directly. I also asked a Vietnamese food truck in December—run by an Asian-American man at the grill and an African-American man taking customer orders—if they would continue operating through the winter months. Before giving the African American guy at the front the chance to respond to my question, the Asian-American man at the grill replied with a short “of course!” without even turning around or breaking focus. Since this Vietnamese truck was probably the only truck these two operated, the chef made it apparent to me that it was imperative to stay open throughout the winter in order to keep a steady income.
When I returned to Philadelphia after the Christmas break, my first objective was to travel to the city to see if indeed the cold temperatures influenced the business flow of the food truck scene. Once I entered the “food truck haven” near University of Pennsylvania, I looked at the outside temperature gauge in my car which read 11° F and realized that most of the food trucks in the city followed a business plan like the Vietnamese food truck: Every single truck was still open, with long lines full of cold people during the lunch rush from 12-1. The sidewalk and road traffic Spruce Street was identical to a regular summer day, except for small solitary piles of snow on some of the curbs probably from a snowstorm a few days before. Rain or shine, sub-zero or 100° F, the gourmet food truck industry is steadfast and hearty ready to stay and make a permanent impact on the food scene in America.

**Versatility**

One of the more revolutionary aspects of the gourmet food truck is the fact that it is a completely mobile kitchen without any attached trailers necessary for transportation. Unlike smaller food carts, which need to hitched to the back of a car or truck before moving, these food trucks just need to pack away and strap down their cooking equipment and ingredients before they can easily move location if necessary. Street vendors are now much more adaptable to a situation for instance, if they are asked to move by authorities, if a lunch hour is over and they need to move to a dinner location, or if they are asked to cater an event at a specific location, then the truck can move accordingly since the truck is not based at a single locale. The closest thing to a home “base” for a food truck is probably the commissary in which the chefs do all of their food preparation and where the truck parks overnight. Every truck operator I talked to stated that most of the real cooking is done in
the shared commissary; the only work that is done on the truck is food assembly, re-heating, or frying. Since most of the heavy preparation work is done away from the actual truck, it allows for the food truck to be even more manageable for transportation.

This relative ease of transportation and mobility compared to other street vendors is significant because it allows these food trucks to travel outside of city centers to suburban areas and smaller cities or college towns. Now gourmet food trucks—which up until now I have considered an evolution of a common metropolitan tradition—are no longer strictly an urban phenomenon! The food truck industry now can reach as far as it can drive. There is a record of food trucks in over 885 cities across America, according to foodtrucksin.com. They are found in most major cities in every state, a few Canadian territories, and some are even in smaller American towns such as: Oshkosh, Wisconsin; Puyallup, Washington; Butchertown, Kentucky; Agawam, Massachusetts; and Bixby, Oklahoma (foodtrucksin.com 2015). This widespread reach of the food truck industry allows for loads of potential outside of the major cities in the form catering or food truck events and festivals in residential areas or in towns that might never normally see a gourmet food truck—or any street food for that matter.

A new trend that has accompanied the rise in popularity of food trucks is the food truck event. These daylong events are basically a scheduled convergence of food trucks in a single empty lot or space creating an impromptu food court for people looking for a variety of meal options. Instead of being restricted to certain streets, as in Philadelphia, and catering to specific clientele (like students, hospital workers etc...), these food truck events take place in prescribed locations where people come from many different neighborhoods and towns to participate. There are usually at least 20 or more food trucks being
showcased at these events, and they can be accompanied by live music—or other entertainment—and are always well attended, especially in warmer months. A food truck event can give a use to an empty lot, it can revitalize a smaller city’s downtown, and it can bring in extra revenue and tourism to any area. In a way, a food truck event creates a “destination” for people; it gives people a reason to travel to a location where they know has a unique, temporary, varied and delicious eating experience. The more audacious food truck owners can even travel to multiple food truck events in a span of a few days for maximum profit.

Philadelphia has created what the city calls a “Night Market”, which is a brief nighttime food truck festival that generated over $11 million dollars for the city’s economy (Gan 2014). Food truck events have even begun to occur in the town of Swarthmore with the Swarthmore Food-Truck-A-Thon happening each fall, where at least 8 food trucks from Philadelphia and the surrounding area converge on the small town with a population of approximately 6,200 people. A taco truck owner whom I spoke to when they were stationed at LOVE Park mentioned to me that her second truck (the taco one she was working in) got its start at the Swarthmore Food-Truck-A-Thon. The owner lauded that food truck events are huge opportunities for both up and coming and established food trucks. According to her, any real profit in the food truck business is made from catering and these events; on every regular street selling day everyone is just trying to make ends meet.

Much like a food truck event, catering is a new service that can be offered by mobile food trucks and it has loads of potential. Instead of hiring a catering company, you can bring the kitchen wherever the party needs to go, and the host can contact a favorite food
truck or a food truck that serves a specific type of food requested by the party. Food trucks are so versatile and flexible in their menus and operations that a food truck can create a personalized experience for party with a customized menu specific for a certain event. In the book *An Economist Gets Lunch*, Tyler Cowen recounts the day where he hosted an event at his home for 60 friends and family members and in order to feed them, he hired his favorite Bolivian food truck to make an appearance. For Cowen, the food truck offered convenience and uniqueness by developing a unique menu for his party, by camping in his driveway for 5 hours, and by cleaning up all of the trash and food waste created by the truck and the party goers (2013: 245). In this way he was able to make a greater personal connection with the food truck owner and he was able to give a profitable opportunity for an entrepreneurial young business.
Swarthmore students have even been lucky enough to be enticed to numerous on-campus events with food trucks (figure 5). Since gourmet food trucks are not a mainstay near the campus or in the town, every time a truck arrives on campus there is a unique opportunity for students to have a convenient alternative to the mundane dining hall.

![Figure 5: A well-attended Swarthmore Food-Truck-A-Thon during the spring](Photo Courtesy: Ryan Greenlaw)

This benefits both the food truck operator, who gains valuable publicity by expanding its clientele base while collecting a fat check from the administration, and the college who now can access a foolproof way to entice students to attend campus events.

**Conclusion**

A proven, yet difficult business venture with loads of potential, the gourmet food truck gives the public a novel, contemporary alternative to the conventional ritual of dining out in a restaurant. The backlash from brick and mortar establishments is understandable, yet some of the more progressive restaurants recognize the potential of the gourmet food truck and choose to use them to their benefit. In the few years since their inception, gourmet food trucks have actually become an established business model with organized
coalitions lobbying for laws, year round operations, and extended prospects in catering and events. Some of these laws, especially in the city of Philadelphia, can restrict the clientele of the food truck business, but over time the laws could change and be amended to be less restrictive. This attractive new development in American street food is embraced by the people and now, with its massive potential, it is being acknowledged and embraced by the business world.

A time to reflect

So far, in my analysis of the growth in popularity of food trucks I have examined a few of the “gourmet”, or fine dining qualities and a few of the aspects that are specific to the contemporary street food experience. The wide variety of truck options, the use of quality ingredients and recipes, and the presence of a restaurant-trained chef coupled with an informal outdoor experience create a unique opportunity for diners who want to order a great tasting, satisfying meal or get something quick and convenient—since food trucks satisfy both of these needs! It may seem like gourmet food trucks transcend the classic assertions that street food cannot be decadent and that great food must be found inside of a brick and mortar restaurant with a trained chef, but I would argue that going beyond these contentions, gourmet food trucks have carved out their own liminal place in the American gastronomical scene by combining these formal and informal elements.

Food trucks have qualities that are attractive to all parties involved. The prospect of getting a great tasting gourmet meal out of a flashy kitchen on wheels on a street corner brings customers to the window rain or shine. The wide variety of truck options—which is increasing each day with more trucks opening up—appeals to the American consumer and it shows prospective truck owners that it is not a worthless venture. For the entrepreneurs
and chefs who want to open a business, food trucks are attractive because of their minimal start up costs, the ideological and entrepreneurial freedom of owning your own business, and because of the close contact the chefs have with the consumers of their food. Even brick and mortars, despite their qualms and enmity towards the evolution of street food, are beginning to use gourmet food trucks to their own benefit. The public’s adoration of food trucks is definitely understandable, especially if studied in this manner.

Another reason that food trucks have soared in popularity is because of the mainstream media’s embrace of the phenomenon. Hollywood’s interpretation of the phenomenon is manifested in the recent movie *Chef*, directed by John Favreau in 2012 which tells the fictional story of a prominent head chef’s downfall and purchase of a food truck to continue working—which actually is centered on a few of themes I examine in this paper, such as a restaurant experienced cooking team in the truck, the intellectual and entrepreneurial freedom of a truck, and low start up cost in investing in a truck. There are also TV shows on every food related channel that showcase food trucks across the country, such as *Eat St.* or the *Great American Food Truck Race*. When a food truck is on TV, in a way the truck and the owners become a pseudo-celebrity, gaining popularity and a following by publicizing and having people travel across the country to try a specific food truck that they “may have seen on a show once”. Some trucks have been cemented in their popularity due to the rampant media exposure, such as Roy Choi’s Korean taco truck Kogi BBQ operation out of Los Angeles, known as the pioneer for the modern gourmet food truck. There is even a TV show called *Food Truck Face-Off*, which is a spin-off of the popular show *Shark Tank* except focused on food trucks. In this show, hopeful future food truck owners pitch their unique ideas and concepts to a panel of “food truck experts” and then the two teams who
win the votes of the judges are gifted their own fully functional food truck and they have to
compete to see which idea, food, and execution yields the most profit after a two day selling
period. The fact that people have created shows like these further strengthens the appeal of
a food truck and further cements the idea of gourmet street food as a product of our time.

Many articles and TV programs that focus on food trucks always have a segment or
an emphasis and how gourmet food trucks have used social media to connect to the
customers and how social media is necessary for a successful food truck business. I wanted
to see two things, one, if it was still possible to have a rich eating experience at a food truck
without using social media and two, if I could analyze the phenomena without the
prominent use of social media. I have found that it is not necessary to be constantly
following food trucks in Philadelphia on twitter in order to find where they are located and
get a quality lunch for less than five dollars. For a consumer the virtual, social media
feature of the gourmet food truck is an optional supplement to the eating experience,
although it may be different for the owners—for them social media may be necessary.
However, one thing I did find useful during my research was the large number of websites
designed specifically for food truck owners. These websites usually have a comprehensive
list of registered food trucks in cities across America, a how-to or a guide on how to
successfully start a food truck, and a blog for users to post their thoughts and interact
about their food truck businesses. This does not quite fall into the same category as social
media (Facebook, twitter, etc...) but it shows that more than enough people across the
country are invested in this giving life to this new street food venture.

Interviewing cart owners is helpful to my endeavor, their first hand perspective has
helped me gain insights to the industry that were previously unbeknownst to me as a food
truck consumer. By using my own interviews and finding other published interviews with food truck owners I can gain an understanding about how the industry affects owners on a case by case basis, and from this I can draw some greater themes about the food truck movement. However, there is one question that is still unanswered, who exactly is eating at these gourmet food trucks in Philadelphia? Are the food trucks appealing to a certain kind of customer, or to anybody walking by? As previously stated in the thesis, in theory, gourmet food trucks seem to blur the taste hierarchy by combining characteristics of upper class and working-class cuisine. In practice, however gourmet food trucks tend to appear in areas and neighborhoods, which are open to or have been gentrified. Western and Southern Philadelphia are some of the most rapidly developing neighborhoods in the city and it is no surprise that the only street that the food trucks are allowed to have day-to-day operations are located in these areas. The following chapter describes some of my conversations with some of these consumers living and working near the food truck haven, in order for me to get a better grasp on the typical food truck consumer in Philadelphia,
Chapter 3 -- Food Truck Fanatic? Or Food truck Junkie?

Now that I have helped establish an understanding of what food truck owners are doing to revolutionize street food in America, there is still one important part of the food truck phenomenon that I have ignored up until this point, which is the food truck consumer. In truth, it is necessary to grasp a perspective of what is happening on street level from someone who actually uses the service, not just the provider. After seeing just how popular these gourmet food trucks are and how well attended they are throughout the year, I became curious and started formulating questions. For instance, who exactly are these food truck customers at these different locations in Philadelphia? How often do these people go to food trucks? Are these the same type of people who typically patronized street vendors in the past, or are these a new brand of contemporary trendy street food consumers? Why are more people drawn to street food in America now, than ever before? It seems logical that if there has been a dynamic evolution in street food culture occurring, then there would be an evolution or change in the typical street food consumer. In the past, street food culture with its immigrant and blue-collar background seemed like the perfect fit for Philadelphia, a city that prides itself on its working class roots and history and the city turned out to be the birthplace for some iconic street foods including the cheesesteak and the soft pretzel. However, in present day, as the city works through its own forms of gentrification and transformation, so does the street food culture and vendors. I am curious to see if the consumers of the street food in Philadelphia have changed; do they still feed primarily industrial workers and construction workers, or has the customer base expanded to appeal to people, regardless of class hierarchy?
While in the field taking notes, observing, and eating delectable food, one of the first things that I realized was how difficult it would be to identify somebody as a typical food truck consumer. These gourmet food trucks, in practice, serve their food to a wide variety of people at most locations in the city. As I have previously mentioned, street food and food trucks have strong ties to the working class. The “roach coaches” of years past, have been known to park outside of construction sites serving their greasy, hefty, possibly unsanitary—hence the name “roach coach”—foods at a cut-rate price for hungry construction workers. This is no longer the case as the city now has regulations on areas of food truck operation, so no more travelling to each construction site for a specific consumer population. The city has also exacted other regulations on cleanliness and hygiene, absolving street food’s “roach coach” connotations, which, in turn widens the consumer base by abolishing consumer fears. Now, based on where the city allows the food truck, the variety of customers is also apparent. For example, when there are food trucks at the Navy Yard business complex, most of the people standing in line are wearing a suit, since they just left their office during their lunch break, and in LOVE park, the food trucks cater towards tourists in center city, people who have jobs in center city, or anyone who happens to be walking by. At Temple University and University City, the lines are filled with young college students with their backpacks taking pictures of their food. If there are any construction sites in any of these areas, you can bet that the construction workers will be right there waiting in line next to the hospital worker, or the businessperson, or the college freshman. At first glance it appears as if there is no such thing as a typical food truck consumer, but in an area filled with colleges, businesses, and developing neighborhoods there is one consumer group that is garnering all of the food truck appeal. The newest
generation of the middle class, the cosmopolitan, young, college-educated professional is invading the developing neighborhoods of Philadelphia. With this knowledge it seems appropriate to choose to speak to consumers that meet this model.

While it is true that certain food trucks act as a "destination" for customers traveling from elsewhere to find a specific truck, these people searching for their destination probably do not eat at food trucks regularly since the truck is still a "destination" for them. The consumer I am looking for is one who goes to food trucks so much to the point where they are not a "destination", instead they are seen as a "given" or a vital part of their life. Most daily food truck customers are the people who live or work close to the location of operation. From all of the food truck locations in Philadelphia, the Food truck haven would be the most appropriate place to find the type of consumer I am looking for. These hungry locals can help me understand why people keep coming back to gourmet food trucks day after day instead of packing their own lunch or going to a restaurant. In my initial short conversations with random food truck customers standing in line with me at food trucks in the food truck haven, at least three people mentioned the convenience factor of the food trucks as something that makes them keep coming back. Each person I spoke to (about five) lauded the quality of the food and the low prices and all but one praised the novelty allure of the food trucks. How novel it must be to be able to walk out of your dormitory, your office building, or your apartment building and have your nostrils hit by the amazing free smells from a restaurant quality chef making lobster macaroni and cheese! For someone like me, who has gone through the full four years of Swarthmore with out so much as a hint of a variety of food options, I can easily understand the novelty and allure of the food truck haven.
Since I have purchased food from a food truck, I can be considered a consumer, but I am definitely not claiming to be an accurate representation of typical Philadelphia street food consumer. In order to gain something close this perspective, I chose to interview two people, who work in places in the food truck haven, about their food truck habits. These two informants still cannot be seen as complete representatives of the total population of Philadelphia food truck customers, but at least they can be understood as knowledgeable participants in the American street food revolution in Philadelphia. The following section covers a few of the main topics of importance that appeared in my conversations with my informants.

**Novelty as an Alternative with Personal Connections**

One of the first things that both of my informants mentioned during the interview is that the hype and excitement surrounding the gourmet food truck scene in the city has not declined in the least in the two years they have lived here. There is still a definite novelty factor of eating at a gourmet food truck, which causes customers such as my two informants to return day after day. Many different elements of the gourmet food truck contribute to the extra novelty factor, including the elevated quality of the food, the flashy individual brands of food trucks, the extra popular culture and media attention, and the convenience of being located in high-traffic, public areas. Without this added novelty of eating at the trendy, fresh new food trucks, then all of the would-be food truck patrons would have no reason to select street food as opposed to the usual fast food establishments, making their own lunch, and call-ahead take out orders. Since gourmet food trucks fill the niche of an innovative, cheap, better alternative to fast food for the commuters and employees of the city.
Throughout my conversation with both of my informants, I took notice of the manner in which they spoke about their favorite food truck vendors. Both informants refer to the vendor/chef by their first name, in a casual, joking manner and they both recounted stories of multiple interactions with certain vendors. From the types of interactions my informants were describing, I understood that they thought of some of these food truck owners as friends or acquaintances, and that they definitely feel a personal connection with the vendors from who they purchase food. As the second informant explained:

“Ever since I started working in the lab, one of my favorite parts of the lunch break is being able to walk around near the office and getting to talk to some of the crazy truck owners nearby. Most of them are really friendly, except a few can be really serious and kind of abrasive, a bit. I always have great conversations with the crew at Nora’s truck; they’re a bunch of characters over there.”

From this statement, I inferred that the human interactions initiated during a visit to a food truck help contribute to the novelty and uniqueness of the food truck experience. The first informant then added:

“At certain trucks, you can get caught up with the friendly faces to the point where it seems like there is no waiting time, and some vendors have really great memories. I have definitely gotten to the point where the lady at Lyn’s recognizes my face and starts making my sandwich as soon as she sees me.”

A food truck provides a direct connection from chef to consumer, eliminating the need for middlemen such as waiters, a host/hostess, or bartender to entertain the guests. The vendor is able to participate in all of the interactions with customers, face-to-face, which allows the vendor to represent his/her business in any manner he/she desires.
Other than fancy, high-end Michelin star restaurants, few foodservice establishments allow for such an individualized experience for customers. At this point in time, food trucks are an entrepreneurial endeavor, they are not being sourced by companies, or fast food chains where the employees would be representing the greater company—instead the food truck owner chooses to represent his/herself by communicating and connecting with their consumers. This important human interaction, which takes place at a food truck, is one of the elements that sets this street food phenomenon apart from other forms of foodservice (figure 6). Sure, at a restaurant it is possible to eat there enough times so that the wait staff will remember your face and “usual” order, but at a food truck the customer has the opportunity to share that interaction with the person actually tasked with cooking the food. It is a much more transparent operation, allowing customers and chefs to become interconnected and to forge relationships.

Figure 3: A captured, warm moment shared by a vendor and a customer Photo Courtesy: Kevin Strand
Thus far, my informants have helped me identify some of the factors that contribute to the trendiness and the novelty of the gourmet food truck. We are coming closer to understanding why people suddenly choose to eat exclusively at food trucks instead of the usual brick and mortars. If one examines the gourmet food truck phenomenon as if it is just a rebranding of street food in the past, then the novelty will seem to stem from the truck itself; a new venue for an old concept. However, with more effort one can examine the phenomenon a bit deeper and realize that the novelty does not lie in the physical truck. Once we can get past that, we can recognize that the hype, the novelty, the allure of the gourmet food truck is attributed to what the gourmet food truck represents, which is: The Great Quest for Good Alternatives in America. With the craze around publishing a multitude of scientific studies proving that many health problems in America are directly caused by our industrial farm and fast food systems, it is true that there has been a greater public desire from Americans for accessible alternatives to the food deserts and fast food chains to which most Americans are subject. The gourmet food truck effectively fits this niche in the market by providing a great quality, convenient, unique eating experience for the new middle class—the young professional—with an extra degree of (friendly, hopefully...) direct human interaction, which is not present in a brick and mortar restaurant or a fast food chain.

A not so Healthy Alternative?

In a perfect world, the gourmet food truck could solve all of our country's eating dilemmas. There could be gourmet food trucks on busy intersections in cities in all 50 states serving affordable, locally sourced, restaurant quality dishes that are—most of all—good for your health and cholesterol. Nevertheless, we do not live in a perfect world and
even though the new crop of street food vendors are making an effort to revolutionize urban cuisine, in the end it is still street food, which means that the majority of the products sold are deep fried, covered in cheese, salted to an extreme, or drenched in oil. These cooking techniques are some of the most cost-efficient, time-efficient, and easy to execute, so it is logical that lots of the street food options are still cooked in an unhealthy manner due to cost, time, and space restraints. On the other hand, some food trucks try to actively help customers achieve the Great Quest for Better Alternatives by starting themselves with a health food, or sometimes vegetarian/vegan, business model. I have eaten at farm-to-table trucks and vegetarian trucks in the city and it is necessary to say that the rest of the food trucks grossly outnumber them. However, my first informant motioned that one of the most popular food trucks in the city—so popular they had to open a second location according to my informant—is a cart called Aladdin Foods, a Vegan cart specializing in vegetable based cuisines from around the world. When I asked why he thought it was so popular, my informant responded, “Well, I mean first of all the food’s great, and they basically embody what the entire food truck scene is about: A quick, cheap, nourishing option from the street that you don’t feel bad after eating. You can always see lines of the Penn girls all taking pictures of their food cause they want people to know they’re eating healthy”.

It is interesting that he mentioned the college women who specifically went to the vegetarian food cart in order to take pictures. These gourmet food trucks in theory provide the refined alternative that will not tarnish the body in the same way as fast food or street food of the past. If Aladdin Foods is actually as healthy as the picture taking co-eds implied, then it is a shame that my first informant did not listen to himself and eat there more often.
As I stated earlier, when introducing my informants, my first informant regrettably revealed to me his health problems, which he believed were to be caused in part by his reckless food truck patronage. After eating at food trucks each day for a year and a half, my first informant was at a routine doctors visit when the doctor diagnosed him with high blood pressure. My informant explained his interaction with the doctor, saying,

“Yeah, the doctor didn’t explicitly say that my blood pressure was caused by the food trucks, but I definitely know the food I was eating was not helping my cause. I mean my blood pressure is probably unstable from genetics, and then it was really thrown off by all of the salt I was eating. Now I really have to think and pay attention.”

Since then, my first informant has eased back into the food truck scene, with much less abandon, eating at a food truck once every week and a half. This is not to say that eating at any food truck will cause your blood pressure and doctor bills to rise, instead what is being suggesting here is that gourmet food trucks are not the be-all-end-all to our nutrition problems in America. They may not be as healthy we desire, but they still fit the ideal alternative to the present foodservice options and their novelty must be enjoyed in moderation.
Conclusion - Looking Towards the Future

In retrospect, after speaking to both vendors and customers it is safe to say gourmet food trucks have found their niche. They assume a liminal position within the American food system with an established business model, a complimentary public hysteria, and high quality street food—a concept which is contradictory by nature, but, as we know now, complementary in theory. However, in execution, instead of being a hybrid form of food service appealing to all parties it is a gentrified version of an old American working-class tradition. Gourmet food trucks appear to be a reappropriation of street food in a package that is appealing to the new, young professional invading developing neighborhoods in cities across the country. Despite this pessimistic fact, gourmet food trucks still hold a dear place in America’s heart even as such a new creation.

So, now that it is apparent that gourmet food trucks are here to stay in America, what is the next on the plate for street food revolution and the young, foodie entrepreneurs hoping to hit the road and find a way into this enterprise? Will they eventually lose their novelty factor and fade into the periphery of American urban society, like the taco trucks, hot dog vendors, and Middle Eastern gyro vendors of years past? Will food trucks affect rural areas and Middle America in the same manner as it has in urban metropolitan areas? Will they continue in their niche as a hip, trendy alternative? Trends, by nature, run their course and lose their appeal, but as stated previously, gourmet food trucks have lasting power in their accessibility and opportunity as long as the cities’ regulations are loosened. As the gourmet food truck scene matures and becomes more ingrained into American food culture, it will be interesting to see how it can cope with corporate invasion. If independent
brick and mortars—like Papaya King and others—can experiment with the gourmet food truck phenomenon, then how will corporate fast food chains impose themselves onto the industry? Since a food truck is such a low cost endeavor, which directly competes with the fast food industry, it seems like the logical next step for the fast food companies to try to dominate this small-scale competing venture.

Interestingly enough, some fast food corporations have already tried their hand in the food truck scene as early as 2009. Popular chains such as Starbucks, TGI Fridays, Chick-Fil-A, Sizzler, Jack-in-the-Box, and others have all attempted their own food truck ventures to different ends (Beato 2012: 1; qsrweb.com 2009; Dringoli 2012). Chick-Fil-A broke into the Washington D.C. food truck scene in 2012, with a truck serving only chicken nuggets and chicken sandwiches—not even fries—while Red Robin introduced a food truck extension in Los Angeles—one of the most competitive food truck markets—in 2014 (Hahnefeld 2012). Taco Bell uses a food truck for special promotional activities, such their annual food truck cross-country trip stopping temporarily in various cities with free tacos. They even learned about a disappointed small Alaskan town, which was falsely promised a Taco Bell restaurant and responded by airlifting a food truck to the city with the makings for thousands of free tacos (Hsu 2012). Despite these dabblings, fast food mega corporations have yet to break the into the growing food truck industry. As of right now, the idea of a “corporate food truck” is almost as contradictory as “gourmet street food” sounded 10 years ago. At this moment, it just does not make sense.

Gourmet food trucks are an open business venture in such because it is a new industry on the rise and it is incredibly low risk and low cost for a foodservice business. Any individual or organization can invest in a food truck; there are no specific official
qualifications for buying a food truck, which adds to the allure of delving into the gourmet street food scene. In this way the gourmet food truck provides the perfect venue for American entrepreneurship. My second informant made this explicitly clear during our interview when he suggested that:

"Part of why I think people like them is because they fit in with the American ‘dream of entrepreneurship’. It has to do with the fact that they’re all individual and unique; each vendor is putting themselves on a plate for the public to enjoy”

This American ‘dream of entrepreneurship’ he mentions, is a contemporary version of the American Dream and is much more centered on individual enterprise. The gourmet food truck embodies this American entrepreneurship dream, which resonates so well with the public. Opening a food truck is a completely individual endeavor—with exception of the employees—in which you are your own boss, dispensing your own products, which represent your own innovation and creativity, and all of that in your own local community! The owners/vendors can take pride in their own creation and in the fact that they represent themselves successfully. These individualized entrepreneurial endeavors are what connect the hungry American public, and people like my informants, to the eccentric owners and chefs, which we know and love, and build lasting relationships with.

At a first glance, this possibility of a corporate fast food invasion of the gourmet food truck scene seems threatening and intimidating to the new industry. How can the little man, Average Joe, compete with companies such as YUM! Brands (parent company of Taco Bell, KFC, and Pizza Hut) and CKE Brands (parent of Hardees/Carl’s Jr.)? These companies are experienced in the food service industry and they have endless supplies of money,
connections, and employees, it almost seems futile to compete with such institutions that run monopolies in other industries.

However, the truth is these super companies have had trouble breaking into the gourmet food truck bubble, and for good reason. When one of the fast food companies experiments with a food truck, it is simply not the same. The corporate, manufactured feel of eating at a fast food brick and mortar is reproduced with something like a KFC food truck. The person who is cooking and serving you food is no longer representing the individual; instead they are representing the company for which they work. A fast food employee who is disgruntled with his/her boss may feel less inclined to put effort into their job of making sandwiches whereas a food truck vendor has an obligation to always try to serve to the best of his/her abilities because their own individual identities as successful chefs are reflected by the quality of the food and service. The eccentric vendor with whom you make a personal connection with—and who cuts you a deal for 4 tacos for $6 because you eat there six days a week—would be replaced with the same employees who would be working in the back of the Taco Bell down the road. The flexible, changing menus designed by restaurant trained chefs would be replaced by the typical #1-10 you might see on a drive-thru menu at McDonald’s. All of the qualities that contribute to the allure and novelty of gourmet food trucks just cannot be simply recreated by the fast food mega corporations.

In order for a corporate chain restaurant to capitalize on the gourmet street food industry, they would have to completely match the food truck business model—a model that sustains itself and succeeds by being the alternative to these fast food companies. In effect, by replicating the model exactly, they would be encroaching and taking away customers from their established fast food brick and mortar businesses. For instance, it
would not make any sense for a McDonald’s food truck to be anywhere close to a McDonald’s—and with 14,350 store locations in the United States, it’s actually difficult to be far from a McDonald’s—it would be appealing to the same customers but as an alternative to the brick and mortar establishment, as the food truck is designed.

The best way for a chain restaurant corporation to enter into and become involved in the gourmet food truck scene would be to approach it as something supplemental and beneficial to their existing business, not something to take over and exploit. Instead of replicating the food truck business model, they need to think of way to use the mobile food scene to their advantage as large companies and produce their own interpretation of the food truck phenomenon. I mentioned previously how individual brick and mortar establishments have used food trucks to their benefit as an extension of the businesses, like Papaya King and Tacos Don Memos, but some restaurants are adding an extra twist to their mobile additional kitchens. In order to keep up with the “freshness” of the gourmet food truck scene, some brick and mortars and even some fast food restaurant chains have begun to use gourmet food trucks as a venue for experimentation and testing out new items and recipes before adding them to the restaurant menu (urbanspoon.com, Martinez 2013). When using a food truck as a test kitchen, by default the food truck is also working as a moving billboard with immediate culinary benefits for the consumer. In this way, the brick and mortar establishment or the fast food corporation can be constantly promoting with a food truck while also receiving direct, face-to-face feedback from consumers on their experimental test items. If a fast food corporation wants to encroach on the food truck business, it must be approached as a venture that can benefit the company via marketing and public exposure, not as a primary source of revenue. As I stated in a previous chapter,
the food truck vendors with whom I spoke never really lauded the extensive paychecks they were collecting, so for a giant corporation with massive funds the profitability of a food truck extension is awfully low while instead the marketing potential is extremely high. The fact that the gourmet food truck phenomenon is so difficult for large corporate industry to invade and monopolize shows that there is indeed a bubble for this new street food business and allows small independent business and entrepreneurs to compete with mega corporations in the food service trade, something which has been controlled by big businesses for decades.

However just as street food has evolved in the past ten years, the fast food industry is open for evolution and improvement as well, since more and more people are beginning to become aware of the adverse health problems associated with fast food restaurants. Just as some mega corporations made attempts at the food truck industry, others are making efforts to analyze the massive appeal of these gourmet food trucks in order to update their business model. Corporations are beginning to understand and jump on the idea of an alternative to their exhausted, inferior, manufactured meals and taking steps towards developing fast-casual menus and restaurants. Fast casual is a relatively contemporary concept that combines qualities of both fast food restaurants and casual dining restaurants. A food trend that has established itself firmly since the early 2000s in American food culture with restaurants such as Chipotle, Panera, and Pei Wei, its appeal lies in the same kind of liminality of the gourmet food truck—a hybrid of two contradictory concepts like ‘gourmet’ and ‘street food’ (Ferdman 2015). This fast-casual model was the first alternative to the omnipresent fast food industry, until the independent gourmet food trucks burgeoned onto the scene.
Some of the fast food corporations have tested out their fast-casual concepts in recent months in different cities across the nation. These corporations have studied and analyzed the novelty of these alternatives such as fast-casual and gourmet street fare in order to come up with ways to appeal to the “foodies” who seek variety and alternatives to the usual fast food suspects. Taco Bell Corporation is at the forefront of this fast-casual transition, premiering their version of brick and mortar restaurants serving what they call “food truck food, that you don't have to chase,” (qtd. in DeJesus 2014). The US Taco Co. debuted in Huntington Beach, California in August 2014, serving more expensive tacos with upscale ingredients and innovative flavor combinations such as their interpretation of the Philly Cheesesteak, the “Brotherly Love Taco”, or the “One-Percenter Taco,” which features fresh lobster meat and garlic coleslaw. This concept is still in its infancy, but if it resonates anywhere near as well with the public as gourmet food trucks have, then there is potential for greater competition between the small independent food truck owners and the large fast food corporations.

In Reflection

Sometime during the middle of the research process, I had the wild idea that perhaps gourmet food trucks will spread into cities and towns across America populating urban and suburban areas in all fifty states. Perhaps their hype will never die down and people eventually stop going to fast food restaurants. Perhaps they will completely replace fast food chains one day. Perhaps when traveling in new places, you won't have to stop at drive-thrus for some questionable food (looking at you McDonald’s McRib) that could potentially make you sick in the car; instead you will be able to support one of a wide variety of independent local businesses seeking to feed you at a reasonable price.
Nevertheless the world is not a perfect place, and the prospect of gourmet street food replacing these massive fast food conglomerates is virtually impossible thanks to their immense power and control of the American food system. Replacing the corporations is futile, but gourmet food trucks can still coexist and inhabit their special niche, which the public loves, within the American food sphere.

I think it is now safe to say that we have at least a greater understanding of the recent evolution of street food in America. After analyzing the phenomenon from a multitude of different perspectives we were able to successfully identify some of the qualities, which set apart gourmet food trucks from other types of service in the foodservice industry. These food trucks are a hybrid of “high-class” gourmet and “low-class” street food, which offers creative alternatives to the usual corporate suspects that we all lament. They create intentional communities with their long lines and food truck events where people can make connections with other customers and the vendor/owner themselves. The gourmet food truck is a proven entrepreneurial business model that can coexist and compete with large fast food corporations. For this generation, the gourmet food truck is an adequate reflection of the times: seeking an alternative which does not support the massive companies that already dominate the country, while encouraging creativity and innovation at the same time.

It is interesting to consider that perhaps the gourmet food truck is a reflection in the American change of consciousness towards their food. Many Americans are beginning to care about the sources of their foods and its health properties because they have either experienced, or seen a family member experience a health problem thanks to their available food options. Consumers—especially middle-class and above—are opting for
locally-sourced foods over fast food restaurants, and now they are choosing to patronize these gourmet food trucks over brick and mortars in the city. Zoning regulations must be refined and reworked in order to allow the gourmet food trucks to reach all areas of the city. In some of the more lower-income neighborhoods there are still food deserts filled with fast food restaurants that could benefit from even a taste of the food truck business. If that were to occur, the food truck could lose its elitist, gentrified connotations and adopt the identity of a cheap, accessible, quality alternative. As long as more and more of the public develops a passion in what they are eating, then the gourmet food truck scene has endless possibilities.
References


