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Westways

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Roaming Restaurants

A taste of the food-truck phenomenon

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MEALS ON WHEELS

Take a tour of our favorite L.A. food trucks

BY KEREN ENGELBERG

Call it the democratization of gourmet food. The elevation of the roach coach. If you've driven down L.A.'s Miracle Mile at lunchtime or hit The Brig in Venice in the wee hours, you've seen them—or maybe even tried them. They are the new food trucks, and they are not the taco trucks you've known. Certainly, mobile eateries have long been a part of the Los Angeles food scene, but this new breed has upped the ante—with food that pushes the culinary envelope, trucks designed to reflect the lofty ambitions of their owner-chefs, and a community of fans who track their movements via Twitter and other websites.

It's a trend that's taken hold nationwide, beginning in Portland and spreading to L.A., San Francisco, New York, and other cities. In L.A., we can thank Mark Manguera and Roy Choi for inspiring our first cravings with their Kogi truck, which blends Korean and Mexican flavors in such dishes as short rib tacos and kimchi quesadillas. (See "A Conversation With . . . Roy Choi" on page 64.) Their first truck hit the streets two years ago, and today, five roam the Southland, from the San Fernando Valley to Orange County. Many have followed in Kogi's wake—more than 100 trucks dispensing everything from Indian *dosas* (Dosa Truck) to Hawaiian bread breakfast sliders (Buttermilk) to St. Louis barbecue (Barbie's Q). Here are just a handful of our favorites.

VANESSA STUMP

Churro tots
with iced
Mexican coffee



The Border Grill Truck



Mary Sue Milliken
and Susan Feniger

BORDER GRILL TRUCK

FIND IT bordergrill.com; twitter.com/bordergrill

Food trucks may be en vogue these days, but for Susan Feniger and Mary Sue Milliken, chef-owners of the Border Grill restaurants and Ciudad, the Border Grill Truck has been a long time coming.

"We've been talking about it for 15 years," says Feniger. "Taco trucks are where Mary Sue and I have always eaten. It's something that we both really love. We felt like a truck was so in sync with what we do."

The celebrity chefs, a.k.a. the Too Hot Tamales, are known for their gourmet takes on traditional Mexican cuisine. With nouveau food trucks rolling into neighborhoods throughout L.A., it finally seemed like the right time to introduce their own variation: a gourmet taco truck. Decked out in a cool black design, the truck serves some dishes from the Border Grill restaurants (came asada tacos, green corn tamales), as well as a number of truck-only creations (avocado tacos, churro tots). What they all have in common is Feniger and Milliken's particular modern approach to Mexican favorites.

Dino Moody is a truck supervisor, and he expertly runs the truck five days a week. But fans hoping to interact with Feniger and Milliken sometimes get their wish. "We have great access to customers here," Feniger said while standing inside the truck one recent afternoon. A young man and his mother were at the window, asking what she could recommend that wasn't too spicy.

"Ma'am, we can do anything not spicy," said Feniger, reassuringly.

"I'm from the Midwest. What can I say," the woman apologized.

"I am, too," said Feniger, smiling broadly. "But I like spicy!"

TRY IT

- **POBLANO QUESADILLA:** roasted poblano chiles, chipotle salsa, and three Mexican cheeses in a handmade flour tortilla
- **GREEN CORN TAMAL:** a take on the green corn tamales served in the restaurant, this variation—with sweet corn, *crema*, and *salsa fresca*—comes in a paper cone
- **CHURRO TOTS:** *dulce de leche*-infused churro bites with cinnamon-sugar are served with fresh whipped cream

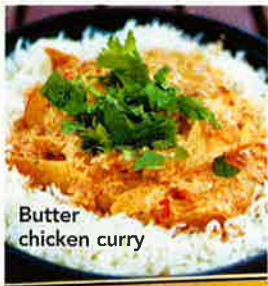
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: PETER BARRETT, FRAN GEALER, WATT ARMENDARIZ; OPPOSITE PAGE: VANESSA STUMP



Lamb frankie



Sumant Pardal



Butter chicken curry

INDIA JONES CHOW TRUCK

FIND IT indiajoneschowtruck.blogspot.com; twitter.com/indiajonesct

When Sumant Pardal's restaurant closed in 2009, it didn't take him long to find another venture. "Some friends turned me on to the Kogi truck, and I read about it," he says. "Within 10 days, I was on the road with my truck."

That might sound fast, but restaurants are in Pardal's blood. His father opened his first eatery in Jaipur, India, in 1948, and Pardal worked in the business as soon as he was old enough. During his 27 years in Los Angeles, Pardal has owned 12 restaurants, including the popular East India Grill chain.

The India Jones Chow Truck is simply Pardal's latest culinary endeavor. The food is mostly North Indian regional fare, including a rotating list of four curries (butter chicken—a crowd favorite—always makes the cut), plus *paratha* (served with a particularly zingy and delicious *raita*), samosa spring rolls, and *frankies*.

The latter is a Mumbai street-food staple with cilantro, tamarind, chutney, chopped onion, egg, and an additional protein, such as lamb or chicken, all wrapped in roti flatbread. But Pardal emphasizes that the most important ingredient for success is less quantifiable. "There's always got to be the 'wow' factor in your food," he says. "You've got to be able to take one bite and go 'Wow, this is great.' Otherwise you're not going to be successful in the truck business." **W**

TRY IT

- LAMB FRANKIE
- BUTTER CHICKEN CURRY
- KEMMA (MINCED BEEF) PARATHA

Keren Engelberg is a features editor for Westways.

HOW TO FIND THE TRUCKS

Go Where They Gather

There are certain areas where the trucks tend to congregate. These include:

LUNCH

- **Downtown:** near USC
- **Westwood:** near UCLA
- **Midtown:** Wilshire Boulevard/Miracle Mile, between Fairfax Avenue and Hauser Boulevard
- **West L.A.:** near the intersection of Tennessee and Butler avenues
- **Santa Monica:** Pennsylvania Avenue, east of 26th Street
- **Torrance:** Toyota, Honda, and BMW headquarters

DINNER/LATE NIGHT

- **Venice:** The Brig/Abbot Kinney Boulevard
- **Silver Lake:** Sunset Junction area, near Intelligentsia coffeehouse
- **Downtown:** Art Walk, on Main Street by Fourth Street

Follow Them on Twitter

Using Twitter is easy.

Step 1: Go to twitter.com and sign up. (It'll only take a minute or two, and it's free.)

Step 2: Click on "Find People" in the top menu bar, and type in the name of the truck you'd like to follow.

Step 3: Click on the "Follow" icon. (You can also opt to have tweets from a particular truck sent to your mobile phone.)

Step 4: Log in to Twitter any time to view real-time tweets from the trucks you're following, or just check your phone for texts from your favorite trucks if you've chosen that option.

Check out These Aggregators

These websites compile tweets from just about all of the food trucks:

- roaminghunger.com
- findlafoodtrucks.com

This site also maps them for you:

- la.truxmap.com

And then there's this iPhone app, which is a GPS-enabled food truck finder:

- **Road Stoves GPS** (app.roadstoves.com)