

## Chapter 1

# Food on Wheels: The Lowdown on Food Trucks

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Understanding a day in the life of a food truck owner
  - ▶ Deciding whether you have what it takes to run your own truck
  - ▶ Walking through the initial stages of starting your mobile food business
  - ▶ Getting ready to open your food truck
  - ▶ Making sure your truck runs smoothly
  - ▶ Drawing crowds to your truck (and getting them to come back)
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**S**o you've just finished watching the latest episode of *Eat Street* or *The Great Food Truck Race* and think that owning a food truck looks like fun. Or maybe you stumbled upon a food truck in your area, watched the busy lines, and noticed that the staff appeared to be having a great time. With these observations, it wouldn't be a huge leap for you to think, "Hey, these trucks get huge crowds, and the employees seem to be happy, so maybe I should run my own."

When on the outside looking in, you can easily miss all the hard work that's involved in getting a food truck business started and ready to serve the community. As the owner, you have to manage every detail of the business, including hiring the staff, designing the menu, and even picking up trash left by your customers. A food truck can quickly become more work than fun if you aren't aware of all you'll be required to do.

This chapter serves as your starting point into the mobile food industry. I take you on a quick tour of a day in the life of a food truck owner and then give you a guide to help you look a little deeper at your motivations and expectations for entering the industry. I also walk you through the steps of starting and running your own truck, from deciding what kind to run to getting (and keeping) followers.

## Checking Out a Typical Day in the Life of a Food Truck Owner

Running a food truck is no stroll in the park. In fact, operating a food truck can involve downright dirty, draining, and difficult work. When your employees drop the ball, it's up to you to pick it up. When a tire goes flat, often you'll be the one who has to repair it. You'll work the most (and longest) hours. You'll work every job in the business, from line cook to mechanic to accountant. To create a successful food truck business, you'll need to develop a culture of hard work, with you being the one setting the example for your staff.

After weeks (or months) of refining your recipes and spending numerous hours on the phone, waiting in line, and filling out reams of paperwork, you're finally ready. Your truck has been outfitted with the perfect kitchen. The sign company has called to inform you that the graphics and menu board are complete. It's time to fire up the grill and open for business. Now comes the easy part, right? Sure, it can be a 9-to-5 job, but not in the way you may expect. The following sections provide you with a look into a day in the life of a food truck owner. (Keep in mind that your schedule will look different if you opt for a different service time, such as breakfast or lunch.)



When I say a 9-to-5 workday, I bet the following sections aren't quite what you're expecting. I didn't include this information to scare anyone but rather to provide a look into a typical day of a food truck owner. Many truck owners I've spoken with have told me that nothing is glamorous about running a food truck. Why do they do it then? According to most, the feeling they get when they see their customers' laughs and smiles after taking bites of the items they just ordered off the menu makes it all worth it — they do it for a love of cooking and serving the public.

### *9 a.m. to noon*

The alarm goes off, and you crawl out of bed; it's 9 a.m. While the coffee brews, you boot up your computer so you can check any important e-mails, Tweets, Facebook messages, and the like that may have come in overnight. From the time you wake up until approximately two hours later, you're busy going over your calendar of events and planning for your day. After you complete your correspondence, you start planning for upcoming events. With 30 minutes to go before meeting with your team members, it's time to get ready and drive to your meet-up location, the commercial kitchen.

## *High noon to 12:30 p.m.*

You meet with your team to discuss your notes, daily specials, and suggestions from lessons learned the previous day. Your team shares with you what they've heard overnight from local news and from customers and competitors. Sharing this information keeps everyone in the loop, part of the team, and, in most cases, in high spirits.

## *12:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.*

During this time, the team goes to the market and bakery or to inventory the food shipments that have been delivered. After getting the food needed for the truck, everyone heads to the commercial kitchen to chop fruits and vegetables, blend the sauces, and grill the meat (if you serve it). Those team members not involved in the food prep will organize the truck to ready it for the work night, fire up their Twitter and Facebook accounts to notify followers of the truck's location(s), and conduct another round of correspondence and phone calls.

## *5:30 p.m. to 6 p.m.*

Time to head to your "office"; you now take the truck from the commercial kitchen's lot to your first stop.

## *6 p.m. to 2:30 a.m.*

It's time! It's time to open the doors, practice your trade, and make your mark on your community. When you reach your destination and a line of people are already at the curb, the sight is both invigorating and terrifying. It's invigorating because you already have loyal followers who have found your location and are waiting to be served a meal from your heart. It's terrifying because you need to park and start cooking quickly so you aren't keeping your customers waiting too long.



You'll have little to no awareness of what's going on outside the truck during this period. Your eyes will shift from the growing queue of ticket orders to the fryers to the main cooking surface while you're preparing the orders as they come in. Now is when you must enjoy your job; now is the point where you'll know whether you've made the proper choice in opening a food truck. If you're distracted or dislike your environment, you may want to start planning how to sell your investment and head to another career.

## Historical highlights of mobile food in the United States

Street food has been a part of Americans' dining habits since the late 17th century, when it was found in many of the larger cities on the East Coast. Since then, food trucks have taken a front seat in the world of American street food and are part of an ongoing food revolution. Here's a brief history of the mobile food industry in the United States:

- ✓ In 1691, New Amsterdam (now known as New York City) began regulating street vendors selling food from push carts.
- ✓ Charles Goodnight invented the *chuck wagon* in 1866 to feed cattlemen and wagon trains traversing the Old West.
- ✓ In 1894, sausage vendors sold their wares outside the student dorms at major eastern universities (Yale, Harvard, Princeton, and Cornell), and their carts became known as *dog wagons*.
- ✓ Ice cream trucks began selling frozen treats in the 1950s.
- ✓ In 1974, Raul Martinez converted an old ice cream truck into the nation's first taco truck and parked it outside an East Los Angeles bar.
- ✓ In 1979, grease trucks began parking on Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, selling "Fat Sandwiches" to college students.
- ✓ In November 2008, Kogi BBQ hit the streets of Los Angeles selling Asian-infused tacos.
- ✓ The Southern California Mobile Food Vendors Association (SoCalMFVA) was created in January 2010, becoming the first organization to protect the rights of gourmet food truck owners.
- ✓ In August 2010, *The Great Food Truck Race* marked the first television program centered on the mobile food industry.
- ✓ In September 2010, the U.S. government added "Tips for Starting Your Own Street Food Business" to its small business website ([www.business.gov](http://www.business.gov)).
- ✓ In October 2010, the prestigious Zagat guide announced that it'd begin providing reviews of food trucks in 2011.
- ✓ In January 2011, President Barack Obama tweeted that his favorite food truck in Washington, D.C., is D.C. Empanadas.

### 2:30 a.m. to 5 a.m.

The night's service is over, and you've made your way back to the commercial kitchen. You clean out the truck and wash it down so it's ready for the next shift. You break down and marinate the meat and, in some cases, even order the bread for tomorrow's pick-up or delivery.

You store the food and lock up the truck. It's finally time to head home.

On the trip home, you reflect back on the day and are very thankful that the oil in the fryer didn't explode or that you were able to start the truck without any issues, and finally, you see it — home sweet home. After a final round of reading e-mails and listening to phone messages, you go to bed. Your 9-to-5 workday is over, only to start again tomorrow.

## Discovering Whether You Have What It Takes to Run a Food Truck

Have you ever wanted to start your own business? If you're self-motivated and have a love of food and people, opening your own food truck can be a great career option for you. Not everyone is cut out for this diverse industry, though. Are you? You can find out with the help of the following sections.

### Monitoring your motivations

Owning your own food truck takes a special type of person. A successful food truck owner needs to have some business sense. Patience is an important asset in owning your own mobile food business, as are good people skills.



Before you invest any more time or money in the process of starting up your food truck empire (except for purchasing and reading this book), you need to find out the real reasons you're motivated to do this. Be as honest with yourself as possible; fooling yourself is only going to hurt you and your pocketbook in the long run.

People have many reasons to want to own and operate a food truck; some of my favorites include the following:

- ✓ They like the business aspect of owning a food truck.
- ✓ They have a passion for food.
- ✓ They want to provide a service to their community.
- ✓ They're self-motivated.
- ✓ They like being around other people.



The following list contains some reasons that *shouldn't* be motivation for starting a food truck:

- ✔ Thinking it'll be easy
- ✔ Thinking it'll make you rich
- ✔ Wanting to be a celebrity chef
- ✔ Being tired of having a “real” job



If you happen to be motivated by any of these reasons, don't fret. Just make sure they're not your only (or primary) motivators to enter this industry.

## Tracking key traits



A food truck's success isn't based on any magic formula, but most food truck owners who do well share many of the same personality traits. They're a special breed of culinary entrepreneurs that are highly motivated, caring, and curious individuals. They effectively balance their personal and business goals, take advantage of others' expertise, and continually seek to figure out the best practices exhibited by their competition. Some common traits shared by food truck owners include the following:

- ✔ **Hard workers:** Successful food truck owners work hard and play hard, too. They get up early, they rarely complain; they expect high performance from others, but they expect extraordinary performance from themselves.
- ✔ **Self-reliant and not afraid to take responsibility:** Successful food truck owners don't worry about blame, and they don't waste time complaining. They make decisions and move on.
- ✔ **Focused on the future:** Food truck owners who have thrived are good at both short- and long-term planning. They're as likely to have a well-thought-out plan for the day-to-day running of their business as a road map for how to run the business for years.
- ✔ **Eager to learn:** Strong food truck owners are always reading, educating themselves, and asking questions. They ask for advice, try things out, consult experts and amateurs, and always look for a better, faster, and cheaper solution.
- ✔ **Action oriented:** Successful food truck owners are proactive and always differentiate themselves from their competitors. They're less worried than other small business owners about the state of the economy and are more likely to look at adversity as a sign to keep moving forward.
- ✔ **Tech-savvy:** Perhaps it shouldn't be a surprise that the best food truck owners invest both time and money on improving their website and are likely to rely a great deal on technology, such as social media and point-of-sale systems, to help make their business more efficient.

## Doing Some Initial Work to Start Your Food Truck



Starting a food truck business may not be as expensive as opening a brick-and-mortar restaurant. With that said, it still costs more money than most people have on hand, and it can still be as potentially risky as opening a diner or fine-dining establishment. Because of this, you have to plan ahead and get your ducks in a row. Here's what you need to do so:

- ✓ The first thing everyone thinks of when discussing the mobile food industry is the vehicles the food is served from. Depending on your area and the laws there that regulate the industry, you need to determine which type of food truck platform best suits your needs. Chapter 2 covers the pros and cons of each type of truck as well as what you need to consider when determining which will be the best for your business.
- ✓ Even if you have the best truck on the streets and the most delicious menu offerings, without understanding the needs of your marketplace, a food truck business is going to have a tough time surviving for long. Chapter 3 gives you a firm grasp on how to research your market and how to understand the way to provide your customers with a product and service they keep coming back for.
- ✓ A business plan is the best tool for figuring out how much money you need to start your business. It describes why, when, and how you're going to start turning a profit. Chapter 4 has the steps to prepare a plan.
- ✓ After you create your business plan, you'll need to start using it to help secure capital for your business. Chapter 5 runs you through calculating your start-up costs and who to approach to get the financing you need.
- ✓ To assist you with getting your numbers together for your business plan and financing, you should hire an accountant (preferably one with restaurant or food truck experience) early in the process of starting your business. Chapter 6 has tips on hiring a good accounting professional.

An attorney also can help provide a smooth start-up process for your truck. She can help you get through the mountain of paperwork you'll be required to fill out and submit for your operational permits. She can also assist you in reviewing contracts and setting up the business structure of your company. So make sure you're working with a good attorney before you sign your first vendor contract and kitchen lease, or even hire your first employee. You can find these topics and more in Chapter 6.

- ✓ Whether they purchase a new or used food truck, most people want to either change up the equipment or at least give it a clean, fresh look to match their truck concept. You also need to plan where to set up shop in your area — what locations are best for parking? To help you sort out these topics, check out Chapter 7.

## *Preparing to Launch Your Business*

Your menu is going to be the tool used to attract your customers, but a lot goes into preparing the items on that menu. This work includes the menu's content and design (see Chapter 8), where the food is going to be stored and prepared (I explore commercial kitchen options in Chapter 9), the supplies you need to prep your meals (see Chapter 10), and who will actually prepare it (check out Chapter 11 for info on hiring and training your staff).

You may spend much of your day working in your truck, but completing the business aspects, like bookkeeping or calling your suppliers, from inside your truck can be difficult. You need an office to do these tasks, whether it's at your home or in another location. Chapter 12 helps you set up your office.

## *Keeping Your Truck Running Well on All Levels*

Your truck is going to be where you spend most of your time during the business day, and it's the spot where you'll be preparing your culinary delights for your customers. Just as a restaurant needs to make sure its kitchen is kept up to code, you must make sure your truck's kitchen and the food you're serving are properly maintained to prevent your customers from getting sick. Check out Chapter 13 to find out more about safe food handling practices and other important safety issues, and turn to Chapter 21 for extra tips on passing all your health department inspections.

You may have a highly trained mechanic who maintains your food truck and makes sure you have a finely tuned mobile kitchen, but he can't determine whether the business being generated in the truck is meeting your expectations. To evaluate the financial side of your business, see Chapter 14.

## *Luring (and Keeping) Crowds*

Sure, stating that attracting customers to your service window is how you're going to make a profit for your business may be common sense, but doing so is a little more difficult when dealing with a food truck because, well, you're mobile. You don't have a permanent location, and to get repeat customers, you have to let the people of your community know where you're going to be. Adding to that, you have the task of providing your customers with products, service, and an atmosphere that they enjoy and that gets them coming back for more and spreading the word to their friends and family.



So how do you bring in these crowds and keep them coming back? Here are a few questions that can help get you headed down the right path:

- ✔ **What about your truck attracts customers?** In other words, what makes your truck different from all the other food vendors or restaurants vying for your customers' attention? Between the food you serve, the atmosphere you provide, and the service your customers receive, you need to get the word out about what makes your food truck worth the stop. Check out Chapter 15 to find out how to master the marketing of your truck, along with more promotional ideas.
- ✔ **Got Twitter?** An overwhelming majority of food truck followers track their favorite food trucks through social media sites, like Twitter and Facebook. Take a look at Chapter 16 to find out how to use social media platforms to spread the word about your truck and where it'll be.
- ✔ **Now that you have customers showing up, how do you keep them?** Who are your customers, and what do they enjoy about your food and services? Maybe they like knowing what to expect from your service and menu every time they show up, or maybe you've listened to their previous complaints and made the necessary corrections. Chapter 17 shows you how to build and retain your followers.

After you've become a veteran food truck operator, and depending on how the crowds in your market react to your business strategies, you'll need to determine the direction for your mobile business. If business is booming and you think you need to expand, which route will you take? Franchising? Adding trucks to your fleet? Adding catering services? On the other hand, if the market just hasn't welcomed your business the way you thought it would, you may have to consider the options of rebranding your concept or even selling. Whatever the case, I discuss all your options in Chapter 18.

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