

TACOS, GENERATORS, AND REVITALIZATION: HOW OKLAHOMA CITY FOOD TRUCK VENDORS NAVIGATE LOCAL REGULATIONS



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Introduction

Oklahoma City has seen a rapid rise in the number of “gourmet” food trucks, growing from less than 10 to over 50 since 2010. There has been a corresponding rise in the number of food truck events which are often tied to revitalization efforts in economically rebounding areas of urban Oklahoma City. However, this rise in food truck presence has been accompanied by difficulties between food truck owners and local, regulating authorities.

An independent food truck trade association formed in 2014, and the City of Oklahoma City recently streamlined the food truck permitting process by offering an single, annual event fee and explicitly permitted food truck parks. Given the shifting regulatory environment and the perceptions of economic development potential for promoting food trucks, research was conducted from June 2014 to March 2015.

Research questions for this study ask the following: 1) What are the current regulatory barriers for food trucks in Oklahoma City, and 2) how do the city's food truck operators perceive and manage to overcome these barriers?

Existing literature on the perceptions of Food Trucks in the United States tends to fit within a larger discussion of street vendors and economic informality (Hawk 2008, Bhimji 2010, Valliantos 2014, Loomis 2013, Hermsillo 2012). Other research has focused on the use of public space (Newman and Burnett 2013, Wessell 2012) or regulatory conflicts (Hernandez-Lopez 2012, Morales and Kettles 2009). Limited research has been done on the social structures of food truck operators and how these social structures affect regulatory success, however, an article by Esparza et al. (2014) found food truck trade associations as crucial to the legitimization of gourmet food trucks.

Methodology

Ethnographic Methods

Ethnographic research methods were chosen over surveys due to the lower number of participants and complexity of understanding cultural perception. Observational research informed and triangulated subsequent interview questions. Interviews were semi-structured allow free-ranging comments and conversation.

Participant Selection

- Food Truck Owners or Operators sought.
- Contacted through events, websites, social media.
- Informal discussions with Business Improvement Districts and Property Owners for Background.
- Responses and participant identities kept anonymous through pseudonyms and double coding of identifying information.

Semi-Structured Interviews

- Semi-structured interviews with 9 Food Truck Owners, 45 to 90 Minutes in Length.
- Questions about experiences with starting out, operations, financing, regulations, perceptions of community, what they would like to see changed.
- Informal conversations conducted with 12 additional food truck owners.

Observational Study

- 15 Street Festivals observed.
- 6 Individual Food Truck Sites observed (Parking Lots, Side of Street).
- Observation of a Food Truck Park.
- Attended Oklahoma Independent Food Truck Association Meeting and Public Meetings for background.

Analysis of Responses & Observations

1 A Strong Sense of Community Helps Create Regulatory Success

Food truck owners in Oklahoma City generally know each other well, and help and cooperate with each other when possible. Many food truck operations started on the basis friendship or family, and came to know each other trucks by working similar events, festivals, and locations.

Many food truck owners help new food truck owners understand the details of the required permits and regulations. “Ian,” a food truck investor explains:

“We, originally, we were a little like explorers. Nobody in one department knew anything, and there was a steep learning curve for us.”

In contrast, “Alex,” who owns a food truck with her husband and started several years later, recalls:

“It was definitely a learning process, but my husband was already very familiar on truck design and what kind of things inspectors would be looking for. The OKC food truck scene is pretty close knit, and another truck owner who was more experienced in building trucks helped us with the major projects like gas and plumbing.”

“David,” another food truck owner, did not have the same kind of help, and his difficulties in making sure his truck met regulatory requirements inspired him to help others. He describes his motivation in helping with the Oklahoma Independent Food Truck Association (OIFTA),

“I know where to go so you don't have to spend three weeks finding out where to go next...I did it the old fashioned way. I didn't know anything about the food industry. I just knew I liked to eat.”

This organization is able to refer food trucks in the association while consulting and lobbying local decision makers. It also reinforces informal social controls to promote compliance. “John,” a food truck owner, describes this process:

“If you join the association, we're keeping tabs on you, making sure you're up to date on your permits and your health codes.”

In this way, the social structure of the food truck community adds to regulatory compliance by providing these sorts of normative, “soft” controls on other food trucks.

2 Business Improvement Districts Mitigate Potential Conflict

Social interaction among food truck owners and staff is formed and reinforced through working street festival events together. These events are organized by business improvement districts or commercial district associations. These organizations serve as a go-between among area property owners to secure permission for food festivals. The street festivals originated from monthly “art walks” in the city's arts districts, and allow for an event every weekend from March through October. The biggest of these festivals, H&8th, is billed as the ‘nation's largest food truck festival,’ and has recorded estimated crowds up to 20,000 people.

“Jack,” a younger food truck owner describes the social aspects of working a street festival:

“It's where the crowds go. We definitely get into it and feed off the energy. Right now, the street festivals are what keep us going. We have fun when we serve alone, but it's always good to go out and see the other trucks. We mostly know everyone and we see a lot of the same people at each event.”

“David” echoes these comments:

“the festival gives us an opportunity, even before it starts to kind of go meet people, you know and trade stories or similar obstacles...talking with one of the guys, you know, “my generator went out.” OK, here's a guy that fixes it. “Oh well thank you, I was looking for one.” ... so we talk to other trucks, we visit. Some of them, we invite to cook outs, we get together.”

One of the ways trucks interact at the festivals is through trading food, generally before the event begins.

“Jennifer,” a food truck owner, describes this process:

“At H&8th, you know, that's just something that we always look forward to is swapping food. And it's great, because you don't want to eat your own food all the time.”

This sense of community and comradery is described in an anecdote by “John”:

“I had packed up, and I was ready to go. And there was a truck that was staying for the night service. I just got on here truck and started taking orders and she's like, “how come I can't hire somebody to do that?” You can't train that, but every food truck owner can do that, you know?”

3 Food Trucks make Commercial Space More Flexible

Food trucks allow for commercial activity to take place in smaller and more flexible scales than is generally possible with a brick-and-mortar property in American Cities. They also allow for potential entrepreneurs to start out with out needing investors or taking on a huge risk of debt. “Mike,” a food truck owner who successfully transitioned to a brick-and-mortar restaurant describes this flexibility:

“It's a game changer when you can start a business and be an operator on such a smaller scale, where maybe you can do it with a small loan or maybe have some money set aside to start it on your own...Most people can't do that on a restaurant scale...We felt like if this doesn't work out, we're not going to lose our ass. And we have this one capital asset, which is a food truck, that we could easily sell.”

Food trucks can also create a temporary sense of density when they cluster or are featured at events. They can create a crowd and street life analogous to larger, more densely populated urban spaces. “John” describes how this can be good for food truck owners:

“you do better when there's 2 or 3 food trucks somewhere. If you're driving down [an arterial street] and you see 3 food trucks in here? You're going to be like, “something's going on.” And so it brings in a lot more customers.”

The flexibility of food truck operations also allows for a flexible use of labor, from the food truck owner deciding her or his schedule, to the use of friends, family members, and temporary help for large events as needed.

Food trucks also allow for location testing. “John” describes quantifying the cost of each service:

“It costs \$125 to open, so if you don't open, you don't have to pay a 125. So, zero's sometimes better than negative 125.”

The negative \$125 to “John” might be the cost of staying visible. In this way, food trucks can expand or close as needed, and at minimal risk to the owner. They offer a chance to start a business with relatively low risk, while increasing the freedom of the owner-operator to serve niche and specialized food.

4 A Broader Discussion of Street Vending and Nuisance is Needed

“Gourmet” Food trucks are a distinct subset of street vendors, and are often held as distinct from traditional taco trucks and informal street food vendors. This distinction is partially rooted in the perception that gourmet food trucks are visited by “foodies,” young, savvy, and affluent customers, while the other forms of street food vendors might be avoided or excluded from operating in the public right of way of a revitalizing commercial area.

However, I found this distinction to be less distinct among Oklahoma City's food truck owners. The food trucks in Oklahoma contain a great deal of diversity, skills, and backgrounds. Many of the food truck owners lacked access to the capital required to open a brick and mortar restaurant, and many lacked the business and real estate experience cited by the few food trucks who had moved to a brick and mortar location. While food trucks require more planning, money, and skill to open than most other forms of street vending, they are still bound by the limits of operating in public and semi-public spaces while still having the advantages of flexibility and a low barrier to entry.

I found examples where food trucks may open up space for other forms of street vending. At several street festival, sidewalk vendors set up tables and goods, and buskers were regularly observed operating without apparent enforcement. Other food truck festivals, such as those put on by the Capitol Hill/Calle dos Cinco BID in Oklahoma City highlight the city's traditional taco trucks.

Reducing the breadth of street vending practices in American cities to “gourmet” food trucks and everything else needs to be critically considered as the experiences from Oklahoma City's food trucks could apply more broadly. Food trucks have challenged the restrictions on the use of public space for commercial activity found in most American cities from the mid-20th century on. The allowance of food trucks opens up questions for planners and cities of how to deal with nuisance concurs while still encouraging the beneficial effects street vendors can have on street life and interest in urban places.

Planners should consider where food trucks operate effectively. Generator noise was cited as a major barrier by food truck owners, and the effects of trash, noise, parking, and traffic can be managed rather than restricted.

Recommendations

A) Create a “One Stop Shop” for All Regulating Authorities

This was the most frequently recommended response from food truck owners. Despite a collective feeling that regulations are not too burdensome for food truck operations in Oklahoma City, improvements can still be made. Several food trucks noted differing information between city and county officials on the same regulatory requirement, and the difficulties of managing several sets of locations and a multitude of permits still requires time and diligence in the best of cases.

A single location could be made to manage all inquiries, inspections, and permits related to food trucks. Varying authority between State and Municipal jurisdictions might need to be resolved, depending on the state. A single person should also be made to serve as a point of contact for food truck owners, merchant's associations, and property owners.

B) Encourage the Clustering of Food Trucks

Several food trucks noted a preference for operating alongside several other food trucks at a location versus serving alone. Despite these preferences and observations, many cities restrict the density of food trucks and street vendor, either through setback requirements or density limits. Business Improvement Districts, commercial districts, and neighborhood associations can help by working with business and property owners to find preferable locations for food trucks as well as putting on events featuring food trucks.

C) Utilize Food Truck Parks as a Temporary Infill Strategy

After an ordinance in 2014 explicitly permitted food truck “parks,” there is currently one food truck park open for business and two more in the area either being planned or under construction. These the use of allow vacant and abandoned lots, which may be held undeveloped by property owners speculating on a future development years into the future. Food truck parks generally feature electric hook ups, which greatly reduces noise issues.

D) Manage Generator Noise

Though this may be difficult to accomplish in practice, there are several strategies to reduce generator noise. First, provide additional sources of power, particularly in targeted commercial areas which may see a concentration of food truck activity. This could take the form of a metered smart grid, possibly built during a large-scale capital streetscape improvement. It could also be encouraged through permitting inspected electrical hookups in the parking lots of commercial areas.

Food truck owners could be aided in using types of generators which produce less noise. The difference between a quiet generator and a loud one is the difference between a speaking in a normal voice (52 dB at 7 meters) and possibly having to shout (75+ dB at 7 meters). Quiet generators tend to be expensive and difficult for many food truck owners to obtain as part of starting up their business. A micro-loan program might possibly set up among several partners to help this process.

Conclusions

Food truck owners in Oklahoma City face relatively few significant regulatory barriers. This “regulatory success” is driven by a community of food truck owners who are interested in meeting regulatory requirements and willing to work with city and state officials to do so. Local officials have also been willing to work with food truck owners and solicit their feedback when changing regulations.

The food truck owners I interviewed described street festivals as crucial to building shared experiences and interactions with each other. These street festivals are organized by business improvement districts and merchant's associations, and these organizations are able to mitigate potential concerns from brick and mortar restaurants and businesses. Food trucks play a role in the revitalization of the areas around these districts by providing a draw for people throughout the

area to come and visit the district's establishments. However, the role of food trucks in Oklahoma City's revitalization schemes is problematic. Overall, they do not alone create a large economic impact, and comprise less than 1% of the city's restaurants. Instead, their value tends to be more symbolic, and their presence in a revitalizing area can draw crowds and signal legitimacy the greater area, and investments in that area. Yet, food trucks have little control over the public spaces in which they operate, and their presence is more driven by the anticipation of attracting a target demographic. Other street vendors could be left out and excluded in this process. The social structure of the food truck community can help change this situation and is an important aspect of how regulations play out in American cities.

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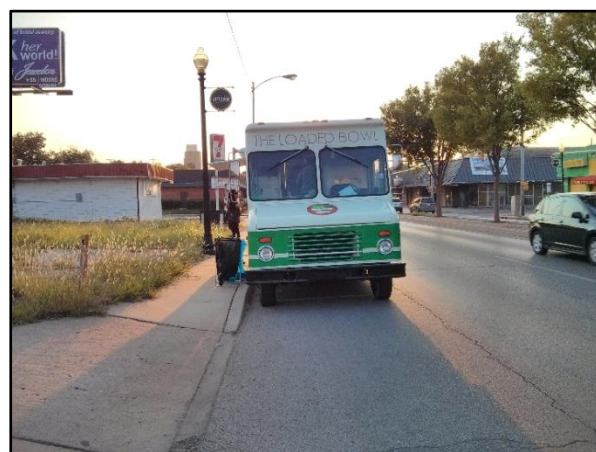
Packed Galley Kitchen



H&8th, Billed as the 'Nation's Largest Food Truck Festival'



Wood Burning Pizza Oven



Serving street-side next to a vacant lot.



Food Truck and Street Furniture in Automobile Alley District



Trucks Lined up in the Film Row District



Food Truck Festival Attendees Visit Brick and Mortar Businesses



Lines and Tables at the H&8th Festival