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NEW FLEET STIRS THE FOOD-TRUCK POT



Tomas Alvine, left, and Lamar Strickland, center, wait on Picnic customers at the Mobile Mavens launch at Olympic Sculpture Park.

FOOD BIZ |
Corporate-backed Mobile Mavens' colorful trailers are revving up competition in the Seattle area's vibrant food-truck scene.

BY JASON AXELROD
Seattle Times business reporter

Biscuit Box follows the same recipe as many independent food trucks in Seattle.

The limited, quirky menu emphasizes its specialty—biscuits. Customers stand by as the frenetic staff whisks aboard the trailer. And, in two minutes, they are sinking their teeth into a piping-hot biscuit smothered in Beecher's cheese.

Cue elated taste buds and sated stomach.

But Biscuit Box isn't just another Seattle food truck. It's part of a fleet operated by Mobile Mavens, a Seattle company owned by Bon Appé-



LINDSEY WASSON / THE TIMES
Patrick Spaulding serves a cocktail at bar Lil' Blu; it also sells craft beer and lemonade.

tit Management.

Bon Appétit, based in Palo Alto, Calif., operates over 650 cafes in 33 states, including the Seattle Art Museum's TASTE restaurant and Seattle University's Bon Appétit cafe.

See > **FOOD FLEET, A6**

Food-truck budget

Beyond buying their mobile kitchens, food-truck owners have recurring operating costs. Mobile Mavens wouldn't share its figures, but here's what independent owners say:

FUEL AND PROPANE

"We use a gas generator now. I think we spend about \$400, \$500 a month on fuel. Maybe more sometimes, between \$500 and \$600 between propane and gas."

— Ryan O'Toole, *Now Make Me A Sandwich*

INVENTORY

This purchase "was probably for about three days and I probably spent about \$300, but that was without our meat. When we do a meat order, it's another \$300."

— Drea Mizer, *Buddha Bruddah*

SPACE

"Usually, the [parking] pods charge us at least \$140 a day to park for three hours."

— Byron Hummel, *NaanSense*

MAINTENANCE

"I replaced a lot of things even from the initial startup ... The budget of maintenance is a lot higher than what people think it's going to be. It may be nothing one month, but another month it may be \$10,000."

— Ryan O'Toole, *Now Make Me A Sandwich*

KITCHEN RENTALS

"Depending on how much time you use in a commissary, you're going to plan on spending between \$1,000 and \$2,000 a month."

— Matthew Lewis, *Where Ya At Matt*



LINDSEY WASSON / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Rachel Hutchins, left, and Scott Lukehart fill orders at GaiBox, which serves Asian-themed chicken-and-rice dishes.

< Food fleet

FROM A1

In a city bustling with entrepreneurial food-truck owners, a corporate-backed fleet of individually branded food trailers smashes the mold and ushers in big businesses able to operate multiple brands to compete for consumers' dining dollars.

"I don't think anyone is doing this, which is one of the reasons why the team at Mobile Mavens is really excited," said Danielle Custer, a longtime chef who co-founded Mobile Mavens with co-worker and experienced caterer Michelle Clair within Bon Appétit.

Large food companies, such as restaurant chains Applebee's, TGI Fridays and Red Robin, have experimented with food trucks in the past. A Chick-fil-A Mobile food truck operates in the Washington, D.C., area.

But Mobile Mavens' trailers operate under brand names such as GaiBox and Picnic with unique color schemes, albeit with Mobile Mavens and Bon Appétit logos discreetly displayed on their exteriors.

"We wanted to grow our fleet, and we didn't feel that multiple versions of the same brand was the way to go," said Custer. "We felt that we had more creative, exciting concepts within us that we wanted to share."

Mobile Mavens started with Biscuit Box and a bike cart called Pop Up in summer 2014, and it unveiled two new members of the fleet June 30. The company also introduced a craft-drink truck called Lil' Blu that can pull an alcoholic-beverage trailer called Half Pint.

Custer declined to specify the costs of setting up Mobile Mavens' trucks. Dub-Box-USA, where Mobile Mavens buys its vehicles, prices its food trailers starting at \$25,000.

"Bon Appétit owns the vehicles," said Custer. "We are employees of Bon Appétit."

Price of entry

It's a stark contrast from



LINDSEY WASSON / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Founders Danielle Custer, left, and Michelle Clair launched Seattle's Mobile Mavens as part of Bon Appétit, a national cafe operator based in Palo Alto, Calif.

independent food-truck owners, who generally raise their own money and work for themselves.

For example, Matthew Lewis' father and grandfather invested a significant portion of the capital he used to start his Cajun/southern cuisine truck Where Ya At Matt in August 2010.

Other owners, such as Jonny Silverberg, don't rely as much on outside backers to finance their trucks.

"I was pretty fortunate that I had most of the money on my own," said Silverberg, who opened his potato latke sandwich truck Napkin Friends in January 2014. "I had one investor at 10 percent that helped me get over the top."

Silverberg used that money to buy a used FedEx truck and had a food-truck builder in Portland remodel the interior and install kitchen equipment. Altogether, he said the finished food truck cost him between \$50,000

and \$60,000.

"You can certainly do it for less; there are many people who do it for less," he said.

Indian food truck NaanSense, which Byron and Anitha Hummel started in August 2014, did it for less. Byron Hummel said he paid \$18,000 for a used linen truck from a company that also outfitted it with his own kitchen equipment, which roughly cost an additional \$10,000.

"We started the business very low budget," he said.

Chefs take the lead

Despite its source of capital, Custer said that the Mobile Mavens culture doesn't feel like a corporate one.

"Although it's owned by Bon Appétit, all of the food trucks are basically grown by Seattle chefs," said Custer, who noted that the company uses local ingredients, such as Beecher's flagship cheese and Honey Hole honey.

Mobile Mavens' concepts

started with Custer, whose Seattle culinary credentials include chef de cuisine of Fuller's, executive chef of 727 Pine and director of TASTE. Custer created the majority of the menus before Mobile Mavens hired its executive chef, Taylor Johnson, in April. Johnson has worked for Bon Appétit for five years, most recently at TASTE.

"All this stuff has to be preplanned," said Custer. "So I probably [created] about 80 percent, and then I tried to leave about 20 percent, as much as I could for Taylor to have his own creative voice."

Custer said that other chefs helped develop menu items for the fleet as well, with a chef serving as a "box lead," or lead chef and operator for each vehicle. Custer, for her part, is planning to step back from her role at Mobile Mavens to focus on other work at Bon Appétit.

"A gentleman [named

Lamar Strickland] that I worked with at one of my corporate accounts created the Jamaican meat pie, and he is the lead on Picnic," she said.

That collaboration is a departure from many food trucks, whose menus and themes tend to be developed by the founders/operators.

Silverberg's Napkin Friends truck serves his creation — a sandwich that replaces bread with two panini-pressed potato latkes. Anitha Hummel developed NaanSense's menu based on her upbringing in India and her penchant for cooking different regional Indian dishes.

"[The menu items] are basically all dishes she grew up with, growing up in India," said Byron Hummel.

Similarly, a childhood spent cooking with family in New Orleans inspired Lewis to craft Where Ya At Matt's southern and Cajun cuisine-influenced menu.

"I took my food knowledge in working in restaurants and culinary school and I applied it to the higher production that is required in the food truck," said Lewis.

Paying the bills

Lewis said that at a typical lunch, his truck serves from 150-200 people. With the truck's po'boy sandwiches priced around \$10, Where Ya At Matt ostensibly pulls in around \$1,500 per lunch.

Custer declined to share sales figures for Mobile Mavens' trailers.

Like other food-truck operators, Mobile Mavens plans to use its vehicles for both serving food to the masses as well as catering private events.

Food trucks find popularity in certain areas.

Byron Hummel attributed NaanSense's success in South Lake Union around the Amazon complex to a large Indian customer base there.

Silverberg said that Napkin Friends' latke press sandwich is a big hit at breweries in Ballard and Sodo, as it goes well with beer. "You're not eating our sandwich and going for a run," Silverberg said. "It's a serious eat. It's not exactly light fare."

Meanwhile, Mobile Mavens is still figuring out its ideal spots.

"I'll have to see how much food we end up being able to sell at different locations," said Johnson, who said he'll be relying on the trucks' operators for such insights.

Unlike individual trucks, Mobile Mavens can mix and match its trailers to different events, with private parties able to request specific trucks. That capability is a valuable asset in Seattle's crowded food-truck scene; about 300 full-service mobile-food establishments were registered in King County in June.

"I think competition is tough in the food-truck world," said Custer. "At the end of the day, I think your food has to be good enough, and that's the most important thing."

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