How do food trucks serve-up community?

by

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COMMITTEE APPROVAL

The members of KRISTINA (KATE) WEISS’S Thesis Committee certify that they have viewed the thesis titled HOW DO FOOD TRUCKS SERVE-UP COMMUNITY? and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements for the Degree of

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Final approval and acceptance of this thesis is contingent upon submission of the final copy of the thesis to Royal Roads University. The thesis supervisor confirms to have viewed this thesis and recommends that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements:

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**Introduction**

In the past few years a new class of food truck began popping up across Canada’s West Coast. These new food trucks offer menus predominantly influenced by hyper-local, seasonal, ethnic, fusion, artisanal creations. Food trucks are now considered a healthy fast food choice. The growing popularity of food trucks and the multi-layered community connections, both curb-side and online, suggest there is active, diverse, social engagement taking place in the flourishing food truck culture. Patrons are flocking to food trucks with sentiments, sensations, and ethical motivations, from wanting to support local businesses and local food providers, to enjoying diverse, haute cuisine style food in open, public, social environments (Hernández-López, 2011; Ibrahim, 2011; Johnston & Baumann, 2015; Johnston, & Cairns, 2012; Pink, 2008; Vannini, Waskul, & Gottschalk, 2012; Zahef, 2009). My research examined the growing community around this new food truck phenomenon and corroborated much of the positive, grassroots, conversation taking place regarding the food truck industry, culture, and its food.

Scholarship argues that food is more contested and culturally more significant than alternative attractions such as retail stores, sports and cultural events, and public parks (Hernández-López, 2011; Johnston & Baumann, 2015; Wessel, 2012; White, 2009). The connection people make with their food, food sources, and foodways (how the food gets to our table) are also vigorously debated and emotionally discussed topics (Hernández-López, 2011; Johnston & Baumann, 2015; Vannini et al., 2012; Wessel, 2012). My research supported the theories that the new food truck community is an emerging, dynamic, flavourful environment which connects food to places, meanings, memories, artistic expression, and identity (Hernández-López, 2011; Johnston & Baumann, 2015; Johnston & Cairns, 2012; Ibrahim, 2011;
Pink, 2008; Pink, 2015; Wessel, 2012). Additionally, by applying a sensuous studies theoretical framework, complemented with a phenomenological methodological approach, the informal interviews with the vendors and patrons produced myriad shared experiences and enriched the knowledge and context contributing to the expanding interest in the food truck phenomenon (Merrigan, Hudson, & Johnston, 2012; Moustakas, 1994; Pink, 2015; Tedlock, 2005; Vannini et al. 2012). The genuine passion and excitement shared by the vendors and numerous patrons in their interviews was contagious and almost palpable.

My objective was to contribute to and mobilize contemporary, interdisciplinary scholarship regarding the blending of qualitative, geographical and phenomenological sensory studies taking place around food trucks today. My research culminated into a micro-public, participatory ethnographic video documentary that is 25 minutes in length and designed for the general public titled Curbside Haute Cuisine. Presenting research in video format contributes multiple layers, narratives, and contexts, and reduces the chasm between academic research, and its meaning making, and sharing knowledge with the general public. The proliferation of technology has made the ease and accessibility of viewing video documentary projects international and ubiquitous, expanding the breadth and scope of audiences. Additionally, the increased demand for documentary content signals the general public is eager for and supportive of knowledge-based entertainment (Littleton & Lang, 2015). Documentaries, by design, are to document important, relevant, emotional, social issues (Nichols, 2010). The internet, technology, and proliferation of smart phones and devices have contributed to the ease and speed of reaching and sharing video knowledge with a lot more people.

**Method**

I drew upon data collected through rich, informal interviews with vendors as the primary subjects (food truck chefs and or owner operators) and then their patrons. I also spoke with city
officials or commerce-related representatives to broaden the scope of information food trucks contribute economically and municipally. When selecting food trucks for my research I began patronizing food trucks to explore the variety of food styles and menus. In tandem, I began collecting online food truck reviews and engaging in informal conversations with friends and co-workers, to determine which food trucks would provide haute cuisine quality food, were popular and well-known, and had a vendor or chef with charisma and personality. I also selected vendors that represented a diverse demographic and geographic area across the West Coast. Fortunately, a substantial list of food trucks and their vendors fit the criteria and were eager to participate. Vendors were contacted through email, Facebook, website contact forms, telephone, or in person when possible. The interviews were scheduled in advance in myriad environments from curbside locations to farmers markets, and from the beaches of Tofino to downtown Vancouver.

The objective for collecting data from food truck vendors was to inquire about their personal connection and motivations toward the food they chose to prepare. As well, the vendors contributed to the discourse surrounding the active social engagement taking place around food trucks by sharing their personal stories and experiences.

The interview style was informal and unstructured; I engaged in open-ended questions to elicit conversation and to prompt replies that were personal and reflective (Vannini et al., 2012; Moustakas, 1994; Wessel, 2012). For example, my opening questions were about their food truck origin story:

- What motivated you to have a food truck?
- What was the biggest challenge you’ve faced with your food truck?
- Describe a memorable experience with your food truck.
- What are significant contributors to your food truck’s success?
The sample of questions expanded, morphed and were adjusted depending on the context and location of the interviewee. However, the conviction and dedication to supporting local food growers and suppliers was consistent among the vendor subjects regardless of location.

The secondary patron subjects were approached onsite, around the food truck. Fortunately, once again, they were eager to participate and contribute with their opinions, experiences, and typically positive observations of the expanding food truck industry. Sample questions for patrons ranged from:

- What brought you to the food truck today?
- What were your motivations for eating food truck food?
- Why did you choose food truck food over a restaurant or fast food option?
- Describe your favourite food truck experience.

The objective for this line of questioning was to engage in informal, open-ended questions where they could speak reflectively about their food truck experience(s).

The subject interviews were recorded using professional standard HD, 4K cameras and corresponding professional audio equipment. Additional footage, for alternate angles and B-roll, was captured using HD broadcast quality equipment (B-roll is additional footage not directly related to the interview subject, such as a juicy hamburger on a plate). The crew consisted of a cameraman, sound recordist, and an occasional production assistant (PA) to help with filling-out the paperwork (which consisted of the required consent form and photo release).

The process of video data analysis followed the procedures of post-phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994). The data (footage) was assembled (edited) in a horizontalization process—that is “regarding every horizon or statement relevant to the topic and question as having equal value” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 118). The footage was organized and filed by subject, location and shoot day. Then it was logged and further divided into themes. The subsequent step
was the development of numerous paper edits. Paper edits are a process of assembling video content in clusters with common themes which develop descriptions of experiences and meanings relevant to my thesis investigation of the food truck community. Moreover, the paper edit processes helped tease-out and compile an understandable and informative narrative at the same time as connecting visually compelling and engaging imagery to bolster the making of meaning.

The 25 minute documentary cut will be submitted to numerous Canadian Film Festivals before looking for a broadcast opportunity. Numerous documentary film festivals take place every year in Canada, it is a highly competitive industry, and the events are generally well attended. Some of the more recognized and popular documentary festivals are: Hot Docs, DocX, Montreal International Documentary Film Festival (RIDM), as well as Victoria, Vancouver and Whistler Film Festivals. It was my objective to create a style to the documentary similar to the ambiance around the food truck: casual, social, but of high quality. The food truck phenomenon is contemporary and topical, and generates a lot of curiosity and enthusiasm, bringing the project to a public audience will be diligently pursued.

**The video**

*Curbside Haute Cuisine* is a geographically and visually diverse, lively, fast-paced, epicurean, examination of Canada’s West Coast food truck culture and industry. It begins in Tofino, where the unveiling of the SOBO food truck winning a spot on Air Canada’s enRoute magazine’s top ten restaurants selection in 2003 suggests that British Columbia was then—as is now—well ahead of the continental gourmet food truck movement. It continues throughout a series of locations in British Columbia, where food trucks offer artisanal products and high quality food at modest prices.
The entrepreneurial spirit in the industry reveals how food trucks are a valuable and resourceful commodity that contributes to the activation of urban space and the connectivity of local food growers and food service providers. Typically, food trucks operating at local farmers markets must make, bake, or grow a substantial portion of their menu. In the city of Vancouver, to obtain a food truck license, vendors must source 50% of their food products and produce locally (Evans, 2015). The participants interviewed for this video further discuss these dynamics.

The video also focuses on the mobility of trucks. Mobility presents a limitation for food storage and this often translates into food that is fresh. Trucks are also quite small—as participants reflect. Food storage restrictions influence menu design, and food trucks are accordingly seen as offering few but fresh options and thus leading a social movement focused on food safety awareness and accountability.

The social dynamics taking place around food trucks reveal a grassroots process centered on the democratization of high quality, fresh, local food with ethnic and fusion menu options as a substitution for franchised fast food. Additionally, the video shows how the popularity of food trucks is not limited to active urban environments but it is also valuable in smaller and at times remote towns that might otherwise struggle to entice tourists and visitors to eat locally. Food trucks are also instrumental in the context of local celebrations and events (e.g. fairs, concerts) taking place over a short period of time. Food trucks and the general interest in sampling new food truck fare, I argue, contribute to the excitement and ambiance of an event. Food trucks themselves are an added destination and event to experience.

The mobility of the food truck industry has also enabled entrepreneurs to reach locations otherwise not well-stocked with fresh food options and therefore has created alternatives for labourers and personnel working outside urban centres. Food trucks are the sandwich trucks of...
the past, re-envisioned, re-equipped, and re-purposed for our contemporary food conscious culture.

When we think about food or discuss food there are senses other than taste that are routinely activated: smell, touch, sound, sight. There is also excitement, anticipation, longing or dislike. Eating is an emotional and sensory topic (Banks, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Stoller, 1997). By using video and sound to enliven as many of the sensory experiences around the food truck world I strove to generate a connection with and understanding of the social dynamics that were taking place in the environments I visited. Canada’s West Coast Food Truck culture is steeped with conviction and commitment to provide food choice options that are healthy, fresh, and supportive of local growers and producers. However, the additional spice and appeal of our food truck culture is the open, casual, haute cuisine quality of the food that once sampled is often not forgotten.
References


