
***Portland Food Carts:
Catering to the Pedestrian***
*Kelly Rogers & Kelley Roy**

Portland has over five hundred food carts, some clustered into “pods” in parking lots and others staking their solitary claim on the sidewalk. Although some pioneering carts have been serving locals for many years, these quirky little mobile eateries have exploded into a full-fledged urban phenomenon in recent years, drawing no small amount of national press in the process. People across the country are suddenly turning an envious eye toward Portland and trying to figure out how to replicate this unusual model. After all, how many other places can you sample white truffle sea-salted fries, salmon fettuccini, perfectly seasoned pad Thai, and the city’s best espresso—all from street vendors selling from a bicycle, a truck, or even a WWII military mobile kitchen?

The trend may be surprising to outsiders, but to those familiar with Portland, the preponderance of food carts makes a great deal of sense. Innovative local visionaries have long encouraged the city’s quirky independent culture and creative entrepreneurial spirit. And then, of course, there’s Portlanders’ love of (some might even say obsession with) good food.

Finally, the City of Portland’s history of progressive land use and transportation planning have helped lay a framework that prioritizes urbanism and pedestrianism, which are key for the success of Portland-style food carts. Many of Portland’s food carts are located on streets served by transit or in areas where neighbors can easily walk or bike to them. Sitting on undeveloped lots, they are essentially interim retail spaces that cater primarily to the pedestrian. Food carts can reinforce the qualities people desire with a well-planned streetscape; in areas lacking “good bones,” they help create ad hoc urbanism and pedestrianism.

WHAT IS A PORTLAND FOOD CART?

Technically speaking, a food cart is simply a mobile unit out of which food is served to the public. In reality, however, there is a staggering variety of interpretations of this loose definition. While some of these carts are truly mobile, many of the trucks, trailers, and other vehicles sitting in surface parking lots throughout the city only pay lip service to the idea of mobility. The self-contradicting moniker “stationary mobile unit” describes the many vehicles residing in a more or less permanent location, especially downtown. As long as the food carts are on wheels, they are considered vehicles in the eyes of the law, and are therefore exempt from building code.

The overwhelming majority of food carts are these “stationary mobile units” that are parked on private property. Portland has a modest amount of mobile trucks that roam around the city – a business model more common in Los Angeles or New York

* Kelly Rogers and Kelley Roy are co-authors of *Cartopia, Portland’s Foodcart Revolution*.

City – but dishing out meals from a trailer on a surface parking lot is a particularly Portland characteristic. Like many cities across the country, Portland also has a number of pushcarts that occupy space in the public right-of-way, although they number less than twenty.

What makes Portland’s street food scene so distinctive—and appealing—is the way vendors continually push the genre’s traditional boundaries, to the point that entire food cart villages have laid down roots and offer increasingly sophisticated and varied cuisine. These days, in a twenty-minute walk through downtown, you’ll encounter a dozen pods of shoulder-to-shoulder carts thronged with loyal customers all happily waiting in line for their favorite dishes. As you stray from downtown, you’ll discover neighborhood carts and pods serving a diverse clientele that ranges from waffle-eating families on Saturday morning to after-hours pubgoers seeking comfort food.

URBAN DESIGN AND THE STREET FOOD SCENE

One of Portland’s original food cart pods is located downtown on SW Fifth Avenue. Almost the entire block between Oak and Stark Streets on the east side of Fifth Avenue is continuously lined with food carts. Complete with awnings, decks, and false storefronts, they give the impression of a classic Western frontier town’s main street in miniature. Office workers, bicycle messengers, lawyers, and construction workers stroll up and down the sidewalk to compare menu options, then wait for their orders, all the while serenaded by street buskers. Food choices range from the ridiculous (Brunchbox’s Redonkadonk, a hamburger with spam and bacon between two grilled-cheese-sandwich “buns”) to the sublime (the lightly breaded Schnitzelwich at Tábor). The Swamp Shack, with moss hanging from its Cajun-styled sign and a deck wrapping around the cart, might win the prize for most expressive architecture at this pod (the 1960s-era office stools don’t quite fit the Bayou theme, but the Shack gets points for providing seating).

Food carts, and pods like the one on Fifth Avenue, have captured the imagination of the Portland public and provoked curiosity about both their development and their impact on the city. A group of Portland State University (PSU) students studying urban planning found the food carts—and their role in activating public space—to be a worthy subject of research for these very reasons. Their study, *Food Cartology*, concluded, among other things, that “food carts have significant community benefits to neighborhood livability by fostering social interactions, walkability, and by providing interim uses for vacant parcels.”

Marcy McInelly, an urban designer at Urbsworks, is delighted with the addition of new carts at the SW Fifth Avenue parking lot. “It’s really the ideal situation,” she explains, pointing to the cart arrangement. “The carts fill up the perimeter of the block, with only a space big enough for cars to get through to park on the inside of the site.” Planners and designers generally abhor surface parking lots, particularly in a downtown location, considering them to be black holes that suck the life out of the streetscape. They prefer buildings, which maintain the visual rhythm of the streetscape and activate it with people. In a down market or on a lot that is difficult to develop, food carts are an excellent interim development

measure, greeting passersby with a colorful and aromatic street wall rather than a line of automobile bumpers.

In fact, one could argue that because food carts, operating from the parking-lot perimeters, capitalize on the edge between the public streets and the private realm, they activate the space in a way that most buildings can't. Standing in line and waiting for orders creates an opportunity for people to connect with other customers and passersby. Food carts actually *encourage* lingering on the street, an activity all but forbidden in many cities today—either by law or as a consequence of poor urban design.

Consider the cities most famous for their vibrant and fabulous street life: European café scenes with plenty of outdoor seating or bustling Asian markets with an abundance of street vendors. In these places, life is literally spilling out into the streets—a desirable condition, noted William Whyte, an urbanist who extensively researched how people use urban spaces. “What attracts people most in an urban place is other people,” he says, and food carts contribute significantly to this liveliness. Whyte observed in a New York study that “food vendors were the centers of activity. Wherever they set up their carts... knots of people formed.”

“Lowly, unpurposeful and random as they may appear, sidewalk contacts are the small change from which a city’s wealth of public life may grow.” —Jane Jacobs, 1961

“Food vendors have been the caterers of the outdoor life of the city...” —William Whyte

William Whyte also concluded that seating is critical for fostering the sociability in public spaces. In addition to helping spark conversation among cartgoers, seating simply makes a huge difference in comfort when you are trying to eat. *Food Cartology* likewise found that seating was one of the most important aspects of a cart’s sociability. Carts located in neighborhoods, frequently on vacant lots, have ample space for tents, benches, and assorted tables and chairs. Downtown sites are more constrained in their ability to provide seating, but the more creative vendors have nevertheless managed to shoehorn in counters and bar stools, decks, and café tables and chairs¹. In terms of street life, these structures function similarly as outdoor café seating would: they provide a space for social interaction and create a more interesting pedestrian environment.

¹ Vehicles on private property (i.e., most food carts) are not regulated by building code; however, some awnings and decks are. Largely overlooked in the past, some newly constructed decks now have caught the eye of City Hall, sparking a new initiative to regulate all structures associated with food carts.

WHY PORTLAND? WHY NOW?

Some of the key ingredients for Portland's food cart revolution are found in its culture. When people think of Portland, they often associate it with high quality of life. It's well known for its big-city amenities and small-town charm, its bikable streets and walkable small city blocks, its proximity to the mountains and the coast, its handcrafted beers and its dedication to local food. Portland's culture can be described as democratic and accessible—it's a place that has become famous for its "virtuous cycle of civic engagement." Portland also has a creative independent streak that often takes the form of budget-minded do-it-yourself projects and artisanal craftsmanship. It's no surprise that the stars aligned for a food cart revolution in Portland. When you consider locals' love of high-quality food, their creative entrepreneurship, and appreciation of good value, the fact that food carts took off here is actually quite logical.

The charmed life in Portland is no accident. Locals came together in the 1960s to fight for the removal of a highway from the waterfront, and in the process they launched a tradition of neighborhood activism with far-reaching consequences. Since then, Portland has consistently voted for neighborhoods over freeways, parks over cars, and civic spaces over gated communities. This history of community spirit was described as a "positive epidemic of civic engagement" by Robert Putnam, author of the books *Bowling Alone* and *Better Together*. Place matters dearly to Portlanders.

And others took notice. Portland's affordable livability has attracted waves of artists and progressives intent on making the world a better place. They continue to build upon the city's history of community spirit and sense of possibility—after all, this was a town where neighbors could tear down a freeway! Where citizens could stop a highway and install light rail instead! Where a four-thousand-acre forest was left standing in the middle of the city! And, yes, a place where food carts would be allowed to take over vacant lots throughout town.

While Portland's culture helped to generate the ingenuity of great food carts and the public's enthusiastic response to them, one can't ignore another critical ingredient: the bureaucratic ease of starting a cart in Portland. Portland's street vendors are not burdened by excessive red tape (at least on private property), and business start-up costs are much lower compared to those in other U.S. cities. Finally, the City's willingness to turn a blind eye toward the ambiguous and loose interpretations of the term "vehicle" has enabled Portland food carts to multiply far beyond their counterparts in other cities.

Finally, if cart-friendly regulations laid the legal foundation, and Portland's culture provided the inspiration, then it is certainly the economy that has fueled the food carts' recent growth. As the unemployed get creative about their livelihood in the current economic climate, food carts are thriving. An *Oregon Business* article noted that "Portland's ubiquitous food carts provide more than great food at a bargain. With low operating costs and the lure of self-employment, hundreds of immigrants, chefs and first-time business owners have turned to

food carts as recession-busting businesses.”

Artisanal, quirky, independent, and an exceptionally good value, the food carts are in many ways the perfect symbol of what Portland is all about. They bring the local community together with the lure of good food and provide local entrepreneurs an affordable way to get into business. Located on main streets or transit streets, food carts cater to pedestrians, and reinforce an active and vibrant streetscape. It’s fair to say that the food carts both stem from Portland’s famed livability and contribute to it, forming another “virtuous cycle” of sorts.

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