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"I came back to

Portland after graduating from Emerson for journalism. A Kickstarter campaign helped us launch the food truck into reality."

—Arvid Brown, Fishin' Ships

FOOD TRUCK *Confidential*



A whole new crowd of cultural stars just rolled in.
But **who are they?**

BY SARAH MOORE

The mobile food craze that has spread like wildfire through every major city in the world hit Portland in 2012, or maybe we just finally ran out of building space for more restaurants. We meet the people behind the wheel of Portland's most dynamic and diverse food scene.

FLAVORS FROM AWAY

The vision of Austin Miller, 28, and Hana Tamaki, 25, **Mami food truck** delivers a taste of authentic Osaka-style street food to Portland. A former chef at the East Ender, Miller was invited to show off his prowess on the Food Network's *Chopped Challenge* in May, despite never having attended culinary school. However, when Miller left the restaurant game



The daughter
of one of Portland's
first sushi chefs, Hana
Tamaki learned the art
of traditional Japanese
cooking at home.
Mami food truck

to open **Mami**, he became Tamaki's student. The daughter of one of Portland's first sushi chefs, Tamaki learned the art of traditional Japanese cooking at home. "I was expected to cook for the family from a young age. As I grew older, friends from high school would come over to try real Japanese food for the first time. They were hooked!"

Now in its second summer on the circuit, the sleek black and botanical food truck is a flashy visitor to local breweries and festivals. The couple describe the menu, which offers favorites such as the rich and salty Yaki Soba and the more adventurous bacon Okonomiyaki (translation: "what you like"), featuring shavings of dried fish that

wave like tentacles under heat, as "Japanese comfort food."

Entering a food truck scene that in 2015 was largely populated by BBQ and Mexican favorites, Miller recalls a certain amount of reservation among customers toward their exotic menu. "People would approach and ask if there was anything kid-friendly. We'd say, 'It's all kid-friendly. Our toddler eats everything here!' Our mission is to introduce people to real Japanese food."

Mami now boasts a loyal following and a packed summer schedule. "We're totally booked out until October," says Tamaki, who's also studying part-time at SMCC. After that, future plans include a stint work-

ing and traveling in Japan over the winter before returning to Maine with a new menu and fresh ambition. "We'd love to get back into brick and mortar, something fun and relaxed—a take-out joint with great beer and room for the truck outside. Something like an *izakaya*—a Japanese pub, where people can come and relax, listen to music, and eat great food."

HAVE FUN WITH IT

The daringly named **Muthah Truckah** gives you a clue to owner Erica Dionne's personality. One of the only food truck owners around town going it alone—without a partner or employees—she's all energy and sass. Where did

the name truck's name come from? "I was on a girls' night out, and we'd all had a few beers. I was talking about my dream of opening a food truck and one of the girls yelled out, 'I always knew you were a mother trucker!'"

Dionne, 32, earned her stripes working in the family sandwich shop Fancy That! in Old Orchard Beach, and in her mother's restaurant in Wells. Dionne credits her mother for her can-do attitude. "She was a single mother—I saw her do it all alone, with a kid and everything!—so I knew I could make a food truck work for myself. Sometimes it brings 16-hour days, but I think I'm superwoman! I want to do it all by myself."

A brief foray as a Subaru sales rep in 2012 confirmed Dionne's desire to be her own boss. "I was told it was time I got a real career and a 401K. I gave it a try, but I decided that a 'grown-up job' just wasn't for me!"

The Muthah Truckah serves up meaty griddled sandwiches filled with fresh ingredients and homemade condiments. Try the signature "Lola," a real crowd pleaser of roasted turkey, cheddar, arugula, chive mayo, and Dionne's mouth-watering bacon jam.

This trucker has no plans to switch her wheels for brick and mortar anytime soon. "I like the freedom the truck's given me. It's something you don't get when you have an actual restaurant. I'd like to get into jarring my jams and condiments for sale in the future, but right now I just love what I'm doing."

"We never started **Fishin' Ships** with sales goals and targets in mind," say co-owners Arvid Brown and Sam Gorelick, both 28. "But we've been pleased and surprised by the success we've had." While the lack of a business plan would almost certainly mean the end of a restaurant, on the food-truck frontier, guts, youthful energy, and innovation can take you far.

A successful Kickstarter campaign in 2014 helped the Emerson graduates raise the capital they needed to purchase a truck, and they quickly set about making the dream a reality. The menu is a spin on a classic street-food combo: fish & chips. Brown's father, a local fisherman of over 25 years, helped to inform and inspire Fishin' Ships approach to sourcing and using the freshest local seafood. Forget the greasy British culinary counterpart—these guys take a non-traditional approach to the classic snack, blending exotic flavors inspired by their travels abroad. Try one of the smaller servings:

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"My mom talked to

Isle and Juan to get me this job. I was never really interested in Mexican food before. Then I tried this and I was like...damn."

—Smarlin German, El Rodeo server

mouthfuls of fluffy fish taco and zesty salsa (\$4), or haddock and bacon croquettes (\$5), a perfect accompaniment to a craft beer.

Brown and Gorelick also spotted the potential of the brewery scene early on, pairing up with Bissell Brothers in its infancy and growing their brands “in tandem.” “We started off serving around 30 people outside their tasting room in 2013. These days, we’ll serve over 130 in one shift.”

True Millennials, the pair love the freedom the truck gives them to travel in the off-season, attend concerts, and build relationships with the city’s creative community. “We don’t want a restaurant! When you own a restaurant you can only hope people walk through your doors. With a food truck you can just put yourself in front of them!”

TWIST ON A CLASSIC

What do you do when you want to showcase your home-grown hot-sauce-making skills? You open your own burrito cart. At least that’s what **Locally Sauced** owners Charlie Eli, 32, and Aimee Ely, 31, from Scarborough decided after growing a bumper crop of peppers in their garden one year. The former accountant/marketeer duo launched their self-described “labor of love” onto the food-truck scene four years ago and have been delighting punters with their imaginative burrito creations ever since, including a blueberry salsa “so good you can brush your teeth with it.” The berries that make their sauces so unique grow on the family-owned Bradbury Mountain Berry Farm—which also happens to supply 3,000 pounds of strawberries and raspberries to Bissell Brother’s popular “Seed” brew during the summer.

The Elys have since quit their desk jobs to commit full-time to the truck. They face a jam-packed summer ahead, serving at weddings, private events, and on the brewery circuit. Even so, there have been the odd bumps along the way: “Two years ago, driving home from a lunch shift, we hit the edge of the ramp off the highway. The trailer came unhitched, and the cart was completely totalled on the highway,” Aimee says. “You don’t have to worry about that sort of thing happening when you have a restaurant!”

On the topic of restaurants: Any plans to follow the footsteps of Taco Trio and switch the wheels for brick and mortar? “We want to keep the cart going and continue creating our home-made salsas and hot sauces,

A brief foray

as a Subaru sales rep in 2012 confirmed Dionne’s desire to be her own boss.

The Muthah Truckah



as well as developing the catering side of things. We also have plans to host events at the berry farm. And we have a three-month-old baby, so I think we’ve got our hands full for now!” Aimee says.

In a city as saturated with eateries as Portland, it’s a challenge to make your brand stand out. However, the team behind **Tacos del Seoul** has discovered that pairing Korean BBQ with traditional Mexican cuisine is a dazzling way to grab attention.

Childhood friends Josh Dionne, 35, and Doug Thompson, 35, who met as cub scouts in their hometown of Brunswick, dreamed up the idea of Tacos del Seoul back in February on a whim. Less than six months later, the pair were facing their first day in the business. “We drove up and down the East-

ern Prom like ten times, trying to figure out where to stop,” Dionne says. “It was *unintentional marketing!* By the time we finally parked, loads of people had come over out of curiosity.”

The unlikely culinary pairing has already proved popular in places like Las Vegas and McAllen, Texas, earning the fusion label “KoMex cuisine.”

“With a foodie community like Portland, it’s been an easy sell. Our classic Seoul Taco (\$3.25 each) combines Korean beef with a locally produced corn tortilla, Asian slaw, sesame seeds, and homemade pico de gallo,” says Dionne, who grew up eating his mother’s traditional Korean cooking. These days, Mama Dionne even lends chef Doug Thompson with food prep. “I’ve brought my mom out of retirement to help us out.

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She makes things like the spring rolls and cucumber kimchi. You'll occasionally even see her on the truck," says Dionne (above).

Tacos del Seoul plans to spend the first season on the food truck circuit introducing Portland to KoMex cuisine and learning the tricks of the trade. But there are bigger ambitions on the horizon: "There's no Korean BBQ in Portland, so we'd love to ultimately go into a restaurant. I don't want my mom getting too relaxed in her retirement!"

BIG FLAVOR, LOW PROFILE

When it is suggested that by opening a restaurant first and *then* a food truck, **El Rodeo** is working backwards, co-owner Ilse Fernandez, 27, says, "We were visiting family back in Mexico when we saw a cart selling street food. We thought it would be a great idea!"

Fernandez and husband Juan Sanchez, 29, already own the relaxed El Rodeo dine-in located near the Maine Mall but found they weren't getting enough public interest in this overlooked corner of South Portland. During the trip to southern Mexico, the pair made the decision to bring this delicious food directly to the people of Portland, and in May they established El Rodeo food truck as a regular fixture on Commercial Street, despite "[having] to wake up at 6 a.m. every morning to secure the spot."

El Rodeo has no real online presence, nor does it promote its "brand." A passing glance at their food truck or Facebook page

FROM LEFT: SARAH MOORE; MEAGHAN MAURICE

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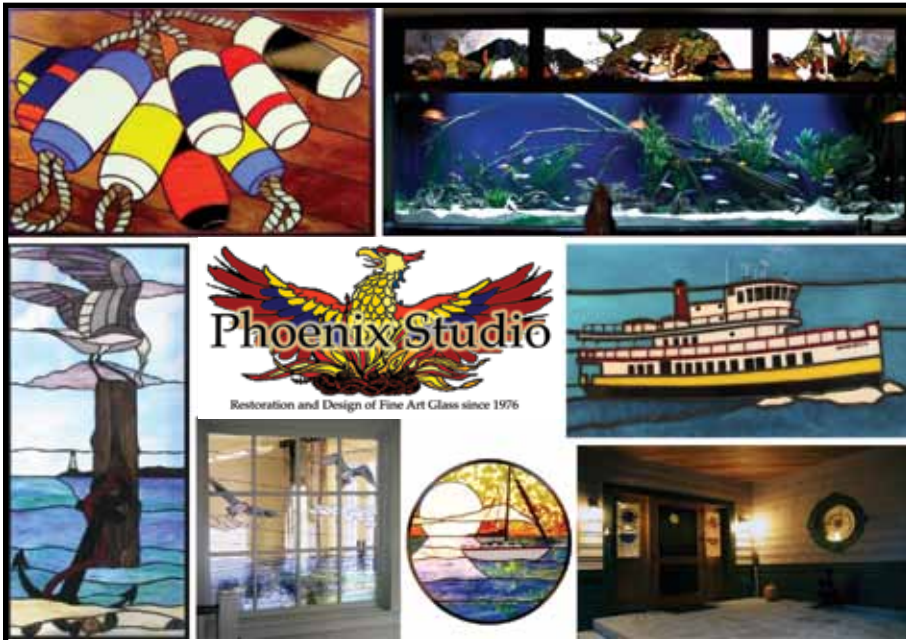
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Such was her drive,

April Perry even talked her step-dad into moving from Arizona to work with her.



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could lead you to think this is just another generic Tex-Mex spot. Don't be fooled. Their menu is small and traditionally prepared. Tacos are served with cilantro and wedges of fresh lime, rather than dollops of sour cream and cheese (three for \$9). The steak and vegetables are cooked and seasoned to perfection in every dish. Smarlin German, 17, the charismatic senior from Scarborough High School taking customers orders on the truck, is a recent convert: "My mom talked to Isle and Juan to get me this job. I was never really interested in Mexican food before. Then I tried this and I was like...damn."

FIRST ON THE SCENE

These days, a trip to One Industrial Way or Thompson's Point is incomplete without indulging your appetite at one of the numerous brightly colored food vendors parked there, so it's hard to believe food trucks were illegal in this city until 2012. In Boston at the same time, where the food-truck scene was booming, three college kids from Maine wanted to see a slice of the action in their home state. Brothers Max and Jack Barber, 21 and 23, and friend Ben Burman, 23, from Cape Elizabeth, began lobbying the City of Portland to lift restrictions on food trucks, eventually succeeding in obtaining a permit to sell their gourmet burgers from a food truck. Back then, there were only eight licensed food trucks operating in the city. Four years later, **Mainley Burgers** has stood the test of time and now includes two trucks and an ice-cream-sandwich cart.

"In summer we're all about the truck, but come Labor Day it's back to studying," says younger brother Max Barber. "In the fall I'm heading back for my senior year at Babson College. All our staff are high school or college kids." Don't let their youth fool you; these guys have big plans: "We actually just signed the lease on a real brick-and-mortar restaurant," Barber says, his enthusiasm palpable. "It's going to open in Cambridge, Massachusetts, but it's going to have a real Maine flavor. Our most popular burger is the The Mainah (\$7.50, featuring crisp green apples, ground beef, and sharp cheddar). It'll be a staple of the menu. Even the interior will have a Maine theme."

The owners of **El Corazon** are well known and well-loved by the 9-to-5 crowd that arrives in droves for their lunchtime fix of authentic Mexican fare. The truck



Several years working

in video production left Jacob Perry itching to “embrace my Maine heritage and make something with my hands.”

Maker’s Mug

serves as many as 200 hungry workers in one lunch shift.

April Perry, 30, the chirpy business mind behind the El Corazon concept, had dreamed of her own food truck for as many as 10 years. The Los Angeles native moved to Maine with her husband in 2011 and saw the potential in Portland. Such was her drive, Perry even talked her step-dad to the East Coast. “I convinced my him to move all the way from Arizona to cook with me on the truck!” The man in question, Joseph Urtuzuastegui, hails from the Sonora region of Northern Mexico, and his background informs the traditional cuisine that El Corazon produces in huge volume every day for Portland’s hungry workers.

El Corazon has changed little on its menu since opening, fittingly, on Cinco de

Mayo in 2013. You’ll find the familiar Mexican favorites on offer: try Baja fish tacos (\$3 each) or the tamale of the day, served in a steamed corn husk (\$3.50).

“There are now loads of great food trucks in town. El Corazon works because we’re consistent. People know our food and where to find us.”

COFFEE CULTURE

In a city as obsessed with coffee as Portland, it’s a surprise it took this long for a cafe on wheels to hit the streets. Thankfully for caffeine-addicts, this summer two very different coffee trucks have made their debut.

Maker’s Mug rolled onto the scene in May, a tiny wooden trailer structure that owner/creator Jacob Perry, 27, describes as “inspired by the ice-fishing shacks you see in northern Maine.”

Perry, born and bred in Bath, built the micro-cafe himself at The Open Bench Project studios, where he now works part-time. Several years working in video production left him itching to “Embrace my Maine heritage and make something with my hands. I’m from a family of makers, people who have made a living with their hands. I wanted to honor that.”

Using beans from his father-in-law’s small-batch roasting business, Crossroads Coffee

Justin Dewalt's journeys

led him to the Virgin Islands, South Africa, and Denmark, where he spotted his first coffee truck and the spark of an idea was ignited.

The Sugarbird Coffee Truck

Beans, Perry and his tiny truck can often be found on weekdays roaming outer Washington Avenue, away from the typical food-truck haunts on the peninsula. "After working a desk job, I know how appreciated little things like good coffee can be" he says.

In the same month, **The Sugarbird Coffee Truck** opened its hatch to caffeine addicts on the peninsula. Hailing from Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, owner Justin Dewalt spent several years periodically working in restaurants around Portland before shaking off the confines of the rat race to set off on travels around the globe. His journeys led him to the Virgin Islands, South Africa, and Denmark, where he spotted his first coffee truck and the spark of an idea was ignited.

Returning to Portland, Dewalt was determined to find a job he could really settle into and love (albeit one with wheels, in case the nomadic itch returns). "Sugarbird is fun and a little esoteric. I wanted to open a truck that featured local suppliers and the newest, most innovative developments in coffee." A glance at the menu board reveals an array of surprises.

"My Sugar Kelp iced coffee (\$3.50) is made with hand-picked kelp seaweed from Bangs



MEAGHAN MAURICE

N.C. Wyeth: Painter



N.C. Wyeth (1882-1945), *Herring!*, ca. 1935, oil on canvas, 48 1/4 x 52 3/4". Collection of Phyllis and Jamie Wyeth

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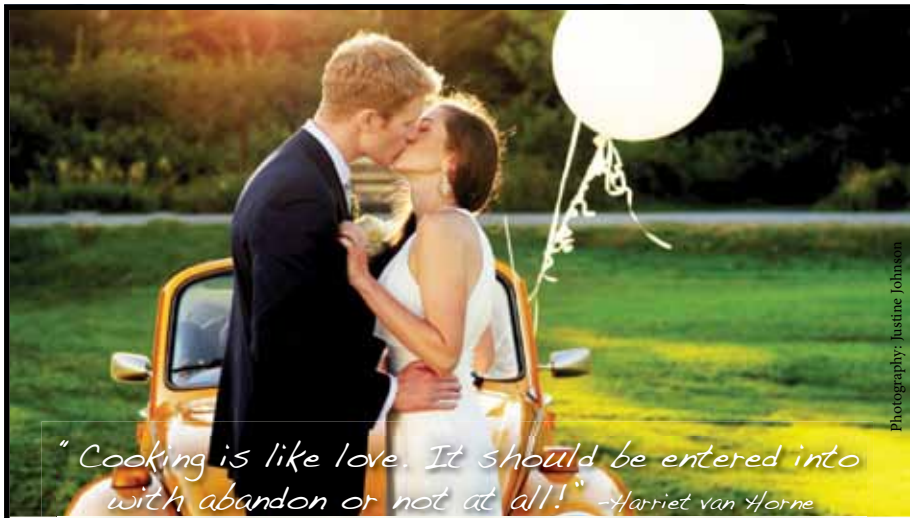
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Island. It took some practice to get that recipe right!" Other exotic treats include Matcha tea-flavored ice-cream sandwiches and a latte spiked with organic Casco Bay butter (\$4). "It's full of nutrients, and the butter really cuts through the acidity of the coffee." Never fear: If you're just looking for a cappuccino, he promises to stick to the script.

NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

Food cart owner and crème brûlée aficionado Charlie Compton didn't let a little thing like being too young to drive stand in the way of his ambition. The then-15-year-old was first inspired to start his own mobile food business after attending the Off The Grid food-truck festival in San Francisco a few years ago. Charlie honed his kitchen experience while on a year abroad in Europe as a high-school freshman, where he learned to make his favorite dessert, crème brûlée, in a restaurant in the 18th arrondissement of Paris. He's also learned the ropes of the food business during an internship at Piccolo, working at Holy Donut, along with his current job in the back of house at Woodford Food & Beverage. Who said teenagers were lazy?

Returning to Maine, Charlie racked his brains to find a way around the too-young-to-drive problem, finally settling on a hand-built cart hitched to the back of his bike. You'll find **The Brûlée Bike** on Sunday evenings at The Summer Film Series in Congress Square Park, serving his new menu of flavors, including chocolate sea salt and espresso crème brûlée (\$6). Once you've made your choice, Charlie will caramelize the topping before your eyes—*et voila*, sophisticated French desserts from a sidewalk street cart.

Now 16 and a junior in Casco Bay High School, Charlie is taking his driver's-ed course. Does this mean a potential upgrade in the future? "It's pretty hard work, dragging the cart up the steep hills in Portland, so I'm looking into my options." Charlie is teenager-vague about plans for the future, saying "I'd like to maybe have my own food truck one day," but that's understandable when your main focus is graduating from high school. ■

If we missed out your favorite food truck or you'd like to tell us about yours, email us at foodtrucks@portlandmonthly.com.

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