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Flash Cafés

Talk about curb appeal. Foodmobiles bring us performance artists on wheels. BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER



Small Axe feeds the throng who've come to catch World Cup soccer at Congress Square plaza. Above, serving jerk chicken in Tommy's Park after dark.

Thanks for dining with us today," says Mark Gatti as he hands over \$2.50 in change from a five-dollar bill along with a fragrant hotdog heaped with sauerkraut and spicy brown mustard. Such a deal! And the never-a-dull-moment people-watching in Post Office Park on Middle Street at Exchange comes free.

Mark's Hotdogs stand claimed its patch of the Old Port 31 years ago. That was during the Reagan administration, a prehistoric, smartphoneless era when there were no Standard Baking croissants for breakfast, no Duckfat fries for lunch, and *no food trucks!*

"My take on the food truck thing is, I give them a lot of respect," says Gatti. "They're run by people who've paid their dues in restaurant kitchens. They may even have been high-end chefs. I'm more like a social worker who's got a hotdog stand." (Precisely like a social worker, actually; he's a vocational rehab counselor during the weeks of winter when it's too cold for outdoor hotdogs.)

"I didn't think the trucks would be a competition, and they haven't been. Urban Sugar came over with a free sample—it was delicious. I've met the El Corazon people—they're nice. I'd get out and sample more, but I'm work-

ing long days. I pull up here around nine a.m. to get set up, and I pull out around six. I'm lucky because I like what I do. I haven't seen any down trend—after so many years, I've got my regulars."

Just across Exchange from Mark's in Tommy's Park you can often find Derrick Anderson and his colorful **Little Jamaica** cart. "I opened up 18 days before the first snowstorm last year. I started on Commercial Street, but I felt like a UFO in the woods, so I moved up here." His menu is straight-up Caribbean: jerk chicken and pork; goat curry; and an oxtail dinner with rice and

HUNGRY EYE



The Eastern Prom is a great spot for “Arabian barbecue.” @CNShwarma



Do not miss Urban Sugar Café’s fresh hot mini donuts. @UrbanSugarCafe



The boys of Fishin’ Ships take in the view of Casco Bay on the Eastern Prom. @FishinShips



Mainely Meatballs makes a lunch stop on Spring. @MElyMeatballs

peas, callaloo, and plantains (\$8 to \$12). “My mother was from Spanish Town, and she was a great cook; I learned from her. Jamaicans can cook.”

Anderson gets around. Look for him at the Reggae Fest on the waterfront August 10 and on the Eastern Prom August 21 with Stream Reggae.

CROWD SOURCING

Taco Trio is one of five food truck and cart operators recently awarded concession licenses to specific urban locations by the City of Portland.

“You had to submit a menu with your application,” says Manuel Pena, who with wife Karen Rasmussen has owned the taqueria Taco Trio on Ocean Street in South Portland since 2011. His taco trailer, which debuted this year at the Old Port Festival, now serves weekday breakfast and lunch on the Western Promenade. Look for Maine Medical Center staff, Waynflete kids, and hungry mansion-dwellers in line. A smaller Taco Trio cart has the rights to Lincoln Park, rich feeding grounds for office, shop, and city employees among the legal types coming and going at the county courthouse.

“I’m being a little ambitious—five menu items,” says Pena. “Three kinds of tacos—vegetable, steak, and chicken—and two breakfast sandwiches—eggs and chorizo, and eggs with salsa.” Lunch tacos with meat are \$4, including rice, salsa, and beans. Tweet @Taco_Trio.

This summer’s comedy *Chef*, starring Jon Favreau, Sofia Vergara, and North Haven Island summer resident Oliver Platt as the food critic, brings viewers right inside a busy Cubano food truck, and it looks crowded. “I’ve seen the movie,” says Pena. “It was funny. Yes, it’s crowded in here, and no, you really can’t cook and handle the money at the same time.”

CONCRETE JUNGLE

Now defiantly untouchable by the forces of development, rehabilitation, or job creation, Congress Square Plaza has if nothing else turned into a boon for food trucks. The city awarded **Small Axe Food Truck** official sanction to set up in the sunken paved square between the grand Westin Harborview hotel and minimalist-chic Vinland restaurant. Small Axe’s menu includes sizzling, glazed pieces of Korean-style pork belly on a bun for \$8, a “curry fish bowl” for



Mark Gatti, the original master of Portland’s street food universe.

\$7, and onion rings for \$3.50. Owners Bill Leavy and Karl Deuben are nearly hidden in their mobile kitchen. “The guys just marked the one-year anniversary of Small Axe,” says hostess Stephanie Broido, out on the pavement delivering a fried haddock sandwich on a toasted bun to a diner. Waiting for your mobile lunch here on cafe chairs provided by Friends of Congress Square and a square wooden seating platform donated by Space Gallery gives you time to contemplate urban gentrification and where you think Congress Square falls on the spectrum. Track Small Axe @SmallAxeTruck

INSTANT ART

Urban Sugar recently joined Small Axe in the square—at times, at least.

“The plan is mornings there, and lunch here and evenings on the Eastern Prom,” says Kevin Sandes, owner of Urban Sugar with wife Valeri. As I write this, they’re parked on Spring Street next to the **El Corazon** food truck for a sunny weekday lunch. Their menu is based on devilishly fabulous bite-size donuts made on the spot, plus a few \$6 lunch sandwiches. The maple-glazed donut bites topped with bourbon buttercream and candied bacon are already urban legend. A small bag of cinnamon-sugar minis is \$3.

The Sandes are year-round food-truckers. “We spent last winter at Sugarloaf. It got cold in here,” says Kevin. “But this is how we pay the rent.” Keep track @UrbanSugarCafe.

“Munjoy Hill’s kind of a perfect place for evening food truck dining. You can BYOB—bring your own blanket—and eat in the [Eastern Prom] park,” says Kevin while Valeri toasts a bulkie roll and fills it with chicken salad, lettuce, and tomatoes, and presents it on a cardboard boat garnished with a tiny, warm sugar donut. “Shawarma serves Arabian barbecue up there, too—it’s amazing.”

Mutual respect seems to run high in the mobile-food fraternity.



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HUNGRY EYE

WITH A VIEW

C.N. Shawarma is the creation of Clayton Norris and baker Jenna Friedman. Norris, whose mother, Sarah Heald, has owned and operated Sarah's Restaurant in Wiscasset for 33 years, graduated from Marist College in 2003 with a degree in journalism. He promptly turned on his heel and headed for a year of culinary school, followed by stints in restaurants "from a little bistro in New Jersey to a 15-person kitchen" in New York. He returned to Portland, working as a sous-chef in Abby Harmon's kitchen at Caiola's for a year before hunting for a truck and a vertical rotisserie.

"Food trucks can run anywhere from \$20,000 to \$200 grand," says Norris. "Depends on age, size, systems, plumbing, all kinds of things." His graphic-designer cousin helped him design Shawarma's truck's dramatic crossed-sword logo.

"Jenna learned to cook in Montreal. She worked in New York, too. There are Middle Eastern populations in both cities, and we were both drawn to the cuisine."

Norris makes chicken shawarma (\$7) by stacking upwards of 30 pounds of marinated boneless thighs and breasts up the rotisserie post and slow-roasting. Sandwiches consist of shavings of the sizzling meat with a spiced sauce in a pita bread. Lamb kofta (\$8) are fried patties in the pita; he also fries falafel (\$7). His spices come from Gryffon Ridge in Dresden—"her stuff is just so fresh." Tabbouleh, fattoush, and watermelon salads are \$3 to \$5. Try his signature "CN potatoes—rustic chunks, deep-fried, sprinkled with sumac and drizzled with garlic sauce." The plan for the summer is Tuesdays through Sundays, lunch and dinner on the Eastern Prom. Check for sure @CN Shawarma.

"And no, I haven't seen the *Chef* movie yet. I haven't had time!"

Adjacent to Norris and Friedman on the Eastern Prom is **Fishin' Ships**—Sam Gorelick and Arvid Brown are using sustainable seafood and local ingredients to make creative variations of seafood shack staples. The High Thai'd is redfish dipped in local craft beer batter and served with spicy Thai mayo. "We bought our truck in South Boston, drove it up to Blue Hill, fixed it up over the winter, and opened up here in June," says Brown. Follow the ship @FishinShips.

IN THE ZONE

El Corazon has been serving lunch on

Spring Street since before it was warm enough to eat outside, when you'd see the Cianbro construction guys lined up on lunch break from renovating the Civic Center. Now the line waiting for \$2.50 tacos and \$3.75 taquitos is dressed in office business wear. Check @corazontwet.

The stretch of Spring Street between High and Union streets is a city-designated "food truck zone," available to the trucks on a catch-as-catch-can parking-spot basis. The Eastern Prom is another.

The **Wicked Good Mobile Kitchen** turns up on Spring with a good cop/bad cop lunch menu. Have a virtuous kale smoothie (\$5) with your oozing cheese steak (\$6). Vegan items are strictly segregated from the meat. Healthy offerings notwithstanding, owners Nate Underwood and Chris McClay say their most popular item is poutine (\$5). Stay in touch @wickedgoodtruck.

Mainly Meatballs keeps it simple: meatball sandwiches—beef or quinoa—in three sizes, a salad side or two, and "sweetballs" for dessert, which are no-bake chocolate and oat drop cookies. A small "one-ball" meatball sandwich is \$4; three balls is \$8. All come with a side.

"We're working on adding maybe a lobster meatball, a buffalo chicken with blue cheese, and a Moroccan couscous vegan ball," says co-owner Daryl Blaisdell, who answers to MElyMeaballs.

WHOLE LOTTA LOVE

What began a few summers ago in a cute, green, retro aluminum trailer in the parking lot at Foreside Antiques on Route 1 in Falmouth is now **Love Cupcakes Inc.**, with an additional truck often found on the Portland/Westbrook line in front of the Racket & Fitness Center, a stand in the Public Market House in Monument Square, a presence at festivals and events like the Fourth of July fireworks on the Eastern Prom, and a catering business for weddings and parties. Contact them @LoveCupcakesME.

"The sweet cupcakes are all-natural, and gluten-free is an option," says general manager Hannah Watson. She's looking to expand the menu because "there's only so far you can go with cupcakes." Maybe so, but she's refreshed the ubiquitous confections with new ideas like banana cake with chocolate peanut butter frosting and gluten-free chocolate with orange buttercream. ■

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