

An Ethnographic Study of Edmonton Food Trucks: Connecting Local and Global Cuisines and Cultures

Selina Ertman

Department of Anthropology
University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta
Corresponding author: ertman@ualberta.ca

ABSTRACT

Every summer, dozens of food trucks can be found scattered throughout Edmonton at community events, festivals, farmers' markets, parks, campuses, and street corners. Food trucks are a relatively new phenomenon in Edmonton. However, these mobile eateries are becoming increasingly popular among customers searching for a unique, urban food experience. This article explores how Edmonton food trucks are able to connect local and global cuisines and cultures through the menu items they offer and the images they present to customers. These items and images are predominantly influenced by local, ethnic, authentic, and fusion creations. Data for this study was gained through interviews with food truck vendors and customers, as well as through participant observation. The following food trucks serve as case studies in my research: Explore India, Dosi Rock, Dedo's Food Truck and Catering, Meat Street Pies, and The Dog. This study contributes to an underrepresented body of literature on street food vending in Edmonton by revealing how Edmonton food trucks can encourage the sharing of cultural knowledge, practices, commodities, and ideas surrounding food.

Introduction and Methodology

Every summer, dozens of food trucks can be found scattered throughout Edmonton at community events, festivals, farmers' markets, parks, campuses, and street corners. Food trucks are a relatively new phenomenon in Edmonton, as well as in Canada more broadly. They have a much longer history in countries such as the United States, where mobile eateries such as *loncheras*, or Mexican food trucks, have been widespread since

the 1960s (Irvin 2017, 46). However, food trucks are becoming an increasingly popular choice among Edmontonians searching for a unique, urban food experience. Food trucks are often eye-catching, with bold colorful exteriors and enticing slogans such as "authentic cuisine" and "street food experience." This article explores how Edmonton food trucks are able to connect local and global cuisines and cultures through the menu items they offer and the

images they present to customers. These items and images are predominantly influenced by local, ethnic, authentic, and fusion creations. Data for this study was gained through interviews with food truck vendors and customers, as well as through participant observation. This data-collection was mainly carried out in the area of downtown Edmonton. My decision to employ interviews and participant observation as the primary means of data collection reflects an ethnographic methodological approach. This approach centers on procuring descriptive qualitative data and aids in understanding a particular social and/or cultural group by actively participating in that group.

I had the opportunity to visit thirty food trucks as part of the participant observation portion of the study. In addition, I was able to interview six food truck vendors and ten customers, all of whom were chosen through random sampling. Interviews with vendors focused on their motives and aspirations, as well as their personal stories and experiences, within the food truck industry. Interviews with customers focused on their motivations for choosing to eat at food trucks and their favorite food truck experiences. The following food trucks serve as case studies in my research: Explore India, Dosi Rock, Dedo's Food Truck and Catering, Meat Street Pies, and The Dog. I chose these particular food trucks as case studies because of the substantial length and depth of interviews I performed with their vendors and owners. Questions consistently asked in all interviews with food truck vendors and owners included the following:

- How did you enter the food truck industry and what are the pros and cons of operating a food truck?
- Where do you get your recipes and how do you decide what to incorporate in your menu?
- Do you shop locally for ingredients?

This study and its inclusion of human participants was approved by a research ethics board at the University of Alberta (Pro00091204).

Authenticity and Traditionalism: Two Main Ingredients in Food Truck Advertising

If you choose to dine at a food truck, the experience will differ from those found at restaurants or fast food locations. One major difference is that food trucks are, in most cases, located outdoors. The food truck customers I spoke with are drawn to the outdoor, diverse, public, and social environments the trucks offer. Convenience is also a significant factor for customers who work downtown and can buy from food trucks during their lunch breaks. One customer I interviewed stated that they enjoy eating at food trucks because "it's outside, lively, and convenient. It's also healthier than fast food." Another customer asserted, "they [food trucks] are more authentic and different than something like Taco Bell. It's more traditional." These notions of authenticity and traditionalism being associated with food truck food can be important advertising themes through which Edmonton vendors promote their businesses. These themes may be expressed as slogans, imagery, and symbols visible on their food trucks. For example, the Edmonton food truck Explore India bears the slogan "Authentic Indian Cuisine" alongside a larger-than-life picture of a bowl of butter chicken, a traditional Indian dish and North American favorite. The Lemon Grass Grill food truck similarly advertises "Authentic



Figure 1. Vietnamese food truck, The Lemon Grass Grill, serving hungry customers at an event.

Vietnamese Eats,” while Dosi Rock food truck assures customers a great dining experience with its slogan, “The Delight of Authentic Korean Street Food.” The popular Mexican food truck, Casa12Doce, aims to instill sentiments of cultural authenticity and traditionalism in its customers by incorporating the Mexican flag, a stylized map of the Mexican states, an image of the Central Temple of Tenochtitlan, and a picture of Mexico City’s Metropolitan Cathedral into its exterior design.

Conceptions of authenticity and traditionalism may also be promoted through the music that vendors play from their food trucks. Dedo’s Food Truck and Catering, for instance, plays contemporary Middle Eastern music while serving customers. Similarly, Irie Foods plays music by Jamaican artists and bands. Food truck vendors employ these advertising elements to present alluring images of ethnocultural cuisines to customers. As Ray Krishnendu asserts in *The Ethnic Restaurateur*, modern urban consumers’ rampant searches for “authenticity” have benefitted ethnic restaurateurs, who have been able to harness the “magic and intimacy” of feelings of cultural authenticity through the food they serve (2016, 51). Therefore, the popularity of Edmonton food truck vendors who promote ethnocultural cuisines may be partly attributed to their use of specific advertising images, slogans, symbols, and music that appeal to customers’ desires for a taste of the authentic and traditional.

Food as a Vehicle for Cultural Transmission and Fusion of the Local and Global

In conjunction with advertising elements that center on notions of authenticity and traditionalism, the specific menu items that food truck vendors offer play a significant role in facilitating cross-cultural communication between vendors and patrons. It is also through these dishes that local and global cuisines, ideas, practices, and people come to interact in meaningful and unique ways. As



Figure 2. Falafel platter offered by Dedo’s Food Truck and Catering

anthropologist Caroline Coggins argues, food trucks that specialize in ethnocultural cuisines are in the process of “bringing a global idea and inspiration for food to a local landscape” (2015, 4). My findings on Edmonton food trucks support this notion of cultural transmission and bridging between the local and the global, as well as the fusion and creation of new identities through food. My interviews with Edmonton food truck vendors, for example, reveal that many of their menu creations are inspired by their cultural heritages and traditions, as well as their experiences travelling and sampling various cuisines from around the globe. For instance, the owner of The Dog food truck, Bjorn Cochran, described in our interview how he and his wife develop recipes and decide what dishes to add to their truck’s menu:

We’ve travelled a lot in Southeast Asia...I’m of northern European decent. Uh, we have a house in Mexico. And my wife is a chef, so we glean all kinds of cultural recipes and incorporate them onto our truck as much as we can. We’re always open to new things, so we do have a very diverse menu...ranging from kind of mainstream meat and potatoes to more ethnic and more exotic flavors.

Bjorn Cochran and his wife's incorporation of "ethnic" and "exotic" flavors into their dishes may be interpreted as integrating global ethnocultural cuisines into Edmonton's local foodscape and may further be contextualized within the process of "otherizing." More specifically, "otherizing" is a process in which products are seen as "authentic" and enticing because they emerge from a place of relative foreignness and/or from minority cultures, as opposed to being situated within mainstream "Western" culture (Irvin 2017, 46). For example, some of The Dog's popular menu items include Jamaican Pakalolo's, a Ukrainian Feast Poutine, and "Korean" and "Asian Explosion" poutines. These dishes all evoke and add concreteness to conceptions of "non-Western" cultural, ethnic, and national identities by conflating these identities with particular culinary flavours, ingredients, and aesthetics.

At the same time, however, The Dog's dishes are localized and adapted to suit Edmontonian tastes. The Dog's Penang Chicken Poutine dish, for example, fuses Chinese cuisine with a popular Canadian creation that will be familiar to customers: the famous poutine. Similarly, Explore India offers customers a blend of Canadian and

Indian cuisine, although menu items such as curry poutine and curry tacos remain grounded in food truck owner Manmeet Singh's family recipes. Moreover, Edmonton food truck Meat Street Pies dishes up pies such as Cornish pasties, influenced by one of the owners' British heritage, as well as pies inspired by countries such as Jamaica, Australia, and New Zealand. Likewise, Dedo's Food Truck and Catering fuses Mediterranean or Syrian cuisine with Canadian flavors. One of their fan favorites is the Shawarma poutine. Ranya Abu Jaib, who owns Dedo's Food Truck and Catering along with her husband, remarked in our interview that, "[their] recipes are, I love saying it's a mix of Canadian and Syrian...or Mediterranean...that's what customers love and that's why we do this." Furthermore, the owner of Dosi Rock, Emmanuel, adapts traditional Korean dishes and flavors to suit Edmontonian tastes through a process of culinary localization that he is continuously developing and engaging with. He stated the following in our interview: "Koreans like less salty food, but here in Edmonton I have to localize tastes...have to change to more salty than sweet...and keep modifying dishes."

This sample of Edmonton food trucks and their innovative menu options provides a glimpse into



Figure 3. Manmeet Singh, owner of Explore India, pictured outside of his food truck.

without having to travel far from home. Edmonton food trucks are able to encourage the sharing of cultural knowledge, practices, commodities, and ideas surrounding food by introducing numerous cuisines to customers and serving up authentic street food experiences from a variety of countries, including India, Mexico, Vietnam, Korea, Syria, and Ukraine. In addition, the fact that five of the six food truck vendors I interviewed are immigrants to Canada raises the question of whether food trucks can be considered partly products of movement across “ethnoscapes,” which Arjun Appadurai outlines as one of the five types of global cultural flows (1990, 296). An ethnoscape refers to “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals” who “constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations” (1990, 297). Caroline Coggins refers to the “movement and shifting of people through ethnoscapes” as a major contributor to the increasing presence and popularity of food trucks such as Parlez-Vous Crepes in Carrboro, North Carolina (2015, 1). According to Coggins, many of these trucks are owned by immigrants whose specific cultural and culinary practices and knowledge inform what kinds of food they serve, as well as the images and ideas they transmit to customers (2015, 1). Edmonton food trucks may similarly be representative of this movement and shifting of people through ethnoscapes, as the vendors I spoke with create and present customers with dishes often inspired by their cultural heritages, traditions, and travels. Through this process, vendors are able to gain cultural capital and legitimize their food trucks as authentic urban spaces, which results in greater successes for their businesses. Edmonton food trucks can thus be understood within the context of ethnoscapes, and particularly within the processes of globalization and immigration, which are central to the movement of capital, people, ideologies, and commodities across space.

Final Takeaways from Vendors and Conclusion

All of the food truck vendors I spoke with are passionate about their businesses, the food they serve, and the personal connections they make with customers. As Manmeet Singh conveyed in our interview:

The thing is with Indian cuisine is that people are scared to try Indian food. People say, “oh it’s spicy, I don’t wanna try it.” I always say “just try one time, if you don’t like it I’ll give your money back.” And, I’ve been saying that for the past five years. I’ve never had to give anyone their money back. We use the right recipes, the right spices that people here love...and now I have a lot of returning customers.

This comment affirms that food trucks are distinct sites of cross-cultural transmission and integration that meaningfully connect customers and vendors through a medium familiar to all: food. Although vendors in Edmonton’s food truck industry undoubtedly experience hardships and difficulties associated with their businesses—indeed, permitting processes, poor weather, short seasons, and street closures are all issues that must be negotiated within Edmonton’s food truck industry—the vendors I spoke with throughout this study mainly described operating a food truck as fun and gratifying. Thea Avis, for instance, remarked in our interview that she and her husband “have a lot of fun with customers” and “enjoy finding new recipes and improving on old ones.” Moreover, food truck vendors such as Emmanuel have aspirations to expand their food truck businesses in Edmonton and beyond. In our interview, Emmanuel revealed, “I like the business. The truck works, and I want to make a franchise of my food trucks one day and get a commercial kitchen.” The food truck owners I interviewed appear to have discovered a promising business niche that, while not always easy to navigate, provides opportunity for fulfillment and growth.

At the intersection of food, commerce, and culture, and within the context of larger flows such as globalization, immigration, and movement across ethnoscapes, Edmonton food trucks create, occupy, and move through positive urban spaces where globally influenced ethnocultural cuisines are introduced to customers and undergo various forms of localization. Through the development, marketing, and serving of local, ethnic, authentic, and fusion creations, food truck vendors are able to connect with customers in a way that serves to satisfy customers' taste buds while informing and expanding their cultural understandings and appreciation. The next time you are visiting downtown Edmonton, why not get a taste of the city's street food culture by dining at a food truck?

Works Cited

- Appadurai, Arjun. 1990. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Theory, Culture and Society* 7: 295-310.
- Coggins, Caroline. 2015. "Parlez-Vous Crepes and Food Trucks in the Community." *The Anthropology of Food Trucks*. Accessed August 23, 2019. <http://foodtrucks.web.unc.edu/parlex-vous-crepes-food-trucks-in-the-community/>.
- Irvin, Cate. 2017. "Constructing Hybridized Authenticities in the Gourmet Food Truck Scene." *Symbolic Interaction* 40 (1): 43-62.
- Krishnendu, Ray. 2016. *The Ethnic Restaurateur*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.