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**Free-Wheeling Food:  
The History and Growth of the  
Food Trailer Scene of Austin, Texas**

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**Free-Wheeling Food:  
The History and Growth of the  
Food Trailer Scene of Austin, Texas**

by

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**Report**

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**Free-Wheeling Food:  
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The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

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What began as small taco carts on South Lamar and catering trucks at construction sites in Austin, Texas, recently, local entrepreneurs have taken the idea of mobile food and expanded it into a regional phenomenon. This report focuses on the range of trailer owners in the Austin, the challenges owners face in the competitive food landscape and tough economy, regulations, and the process of getting started in the new frontier of food service. Austin boasts one of the largest communities of food trailers – stationary, yet technically mobile – populations in the United States and has influenced a growing culture throughout the country in recent years.

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## Chapter One: The Beginnings

Streetlights reflect off silver Airstream trailers at one a.m. where the smells of fried dough fill the air on South Lamar. Lines of Austin's twenty and thirty-somethings are found reining in a night of bar-hopping with something greasy, savory or sweet to cap off their evening, and nothing else will do besides a gourmet doughnut as large as their head. In East Austin at midnight, classic rock blares from a metal red trailer tucked behind a spa as tattooed arms of roller girls hand New Orleans-style sno-balls out the window, as patrons sit under twinkling lights surrounded by pink plastic yard flamingos.

In recent years, trailers have become a staple for unique cravings in Texas' capital city. Other than the 24-hour diners and a handful of fast food establishments, food trailers are key to meeting the needs of all walks of Austin: nourishing the beer-filled bellies well after dark, the families on Saturday afternoons, and visitors across the country during summers, weekends and during festivals such as South by Southwest and Austin City Limits Music Festival.

According to the most recent information from the City of Austin, mobile food permits in the city has nearly tripled from 2006 to 2011. Prior to 2007, most permits were provided to catering trucks and food carts (of which can be hitched to the back of a vehicle), rather than the explosion of full kitchens in food trailers in recent years.<sup>1</sup>

Food trailers in Texas' capital city are not just a hobby, but a way of life for entrepreneurs. Eric Silverstein, owner of Austin's mobile food truck, the Peached Tortilla, set the record straight on his blog about the true commitment it takes to not only

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<sup>1</sup> Nathan Bernier, "In Last 6 Months, 253 New Food Trucks Opened in Austin," KUT, February 9, 2011.

get into the mobile food game, but remain sustainable.

Though the risk of opening a mobile food establishment is more cost-effective than a brick-and-mortar restaurant, there are still numerous challenges, such as equipment breaking down on the road, not seeing family and friends for days, weeks or months in the starting months, and even “hav[ing] money stolen ... at some point.”<sup>2</sup>

On average, about one in five startups in any realm – technology, retail, and even steeper for restaurants – actually succeed the first time around, according to the Journal of Financial Economics. In this research, entrepreneurs are encouraged to show persistence in their performance in creating and executing entrepreneurial ventures, as “first-time entrepreneurs have only a 21 percent chance of succeeding and entrepreneurs who have previously failed have a 22 percent chance of succeeding.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite the doom and gloom in the food industry, entrepreneurs find fertile ground in Austin through its encouragement of locally sourced food and locally sourced businesses.

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<sup>2</sup> “How to Open a Food Truck,” last modified June 30, 2011, <http://thepeachedtortilla.com/how-to-open-a-food-truck-the-10-commandments>.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Gompers et al., “Performance Persistence in Entrepreneurship,” *Journal of Financial Economics* 96 (2010) 18-32.

## Chapter Two: Odd Duck Farm to Trailer

Gravel crunches rhythmically under a pair of tennis shoes, growing louder with each step, a bag of pine chips tucked under one arm. As Bryce Gilmore nears, he extends a firm handshake and a timid smile and offers a calm sense of confidence that makes no note of the prime and well-known culinary bloodline that led him into the business. No stranger to the restaurant world, Gilmore grew up around his father's kitchen at Austin's Z'Tejas Grill and later moved on to study culinary arts in California.

Working in several restaurants between the two states, he was introduced to the "farm to table" concept, and finds one of the most important aspects of running his own culinary business – trailer or not – is knowing exactly where the food comes from and fostering a strong relationship with those that produce it.

"I gained a lot of experience between restaurants in Austin and California before I moved back here, and I told myself I wouldn't jump into [my own restaurant]," Gilmore said, citing that he wanted to be able to sustain a restaurant on his own from his knowledge gained over the years.

Stepping inside the trailer that houses Odd Duck Farm to Trailer, it is a wonder how so many hands and feet and personalities can fit and work comfortably within such a small square footage with the smattering of six employees. The whirl of a box fan hardly conceals the radio currently tuned to a local rock station, one of the employees mindlessly swaying back and forth to the beat as she stocks a cabinet with napkins. A tall, buxom cashier looks over the books for the day with her loose, curly red hair pinned at the nape of her neck, her short skirt a tribute to the heat of late September, while an

unshaven man who looks more suited to wielding an axe delicately chops vegetables in a meditative silence several feet away.

Seeing the smoke rising from a stack atop the trailer, a few customers come to the window and wait to place their order. "Sorry, we don't open for another hour," says the redhead. Disappointed, the couple looks to each other, as if the information is not only shocking, but leaves them wandering the lot for a moment like lost sheep, unsure whether to dine at another trailer or sit under a shaded picnic table until they open. They choose the latter.

In addition to founding and owning the mobile establishment, Gilmore's day begins with driving outside of Austin's city limits to gather produce from local farms just before dawn, only to bring it back to the trailer to be washed, sliced, diced and put on the grill.

In a matter of hours, all of the food sizzling on the grill at that very moment will be sold out well before official closing time at 10 that night. The employees will pack up and head home and Bryce Gilmore will start it all again the next day.

After a dispute between the lot owners, trailers and apartment developers, all of the wheeled restaurants and picnic tables on the South Lamar lot were given notice to vacate the premises by early 2012, which Gilmore took as the major sign to take his popular trailer to the next level. Gilmore had come to the realization that he was outgrowing Odd Duck's modest spot.

Announcing its closure in December 2011, the trailer reopened as Barley Swine, a brick-and-mortar restaurant just down the street from its original location in South



Austin, incorporating the things that made its trailer so popular: local foods, a rotating menu of small plates and a focus on the freshest, highest quality ingredients.

Gilmore transferred the variety of personalities manning the trailer to the new Barley Swine. Inside the new, more substantial structure, a Mohawk-embellished man swings cooking utensils as a flame rises from the cook top in open air and the blonde hostess stays busy on her feet for hours, yet provides a sympathetic calm for those who must wait hours for a table.

And just as Gilmore seasoned food by hand in the trailer, he now stands at the end of the expo line in Barley Swine each evening, cleaning up paprika on the edge of a plate, examining each and every appetizer and entrée like a piece of artwork before placing it upon a waiter's tray for its final farewell onto its journey to its patron's table.

Little mention is given to the trailer that started it all, but one look at the menu gives its roots away with its ever-changing menu and a gourmet twist on common fresh ingredients such as the gulf shrimp with green garlic rice and the croquette with egg yolk and rutabaga.

The upgrade to a more permanent location appears not to have had a negative effect on business. Despite moving into the restaurant environment, patrons now sometimes wait up to three hours on weekends for a table, stilling their rumbling stomachs with beverages at the nearby bars until a table has been readied.

### **Chapter Three: Flip Happy Crepes**

Not far from where Odd Duck Farm to Trailer used to call home in South Austin, a tree-shaded vintage Airstream, now a converted food trailer, known as Flip Happy Crepes sits beneath strings of lights tracing the canopy of trees. It is tucked out of sight behind retail shops and restaurants near Town Lake, but word of mouth and a stint on Food Network has made it one of Austin's most popular weekend brunch spots.

A couple sits close together at a six-person table, sharing a golden brown crepe topped with chocolate, their words unheard by anyone but themselves. Two young girls skip around the oversized silver bullet housing the kitchen for a game of ring around the rosy, then run to their mother, nursing an iced tea and conversation with a friend. A red leash looped around the leg of a picnic table leads to a yawning golden retriever, quietly lying in the shade near its owners feet, indifferent to the strange symphony of aroma that fills the air and weaves through the tables.

Buttermilk dressing and Indian spices. Rich dark chocolate so heavy and sweet it leads to an immediate sweet tooth. Wilted garlic spinach whose scent lingers around a table and the aroma woodiness of mushrooms exits a window in the trailer just feet away.

Where the aroma originates is a group of three women, giggling much like the little girls who had circled the trailer moments prior. Co-owner Nessa Higgins, a petite, sweet-voiced blonde in overalls and an apron delicately tied around her waist, is telling a story about her family, which leads to each of the three women breaking into their own versions in escalating hilarity. Eventually, Higgins, unable keep a straight face to call an order to the window, breaks into giggles over the tiny, crackling PA system.

During a trip to Europe several years earlier, co-owner Andrea Day-Boykin visited Ireland with her husband, executive chef Patrick Gannon, and ate “the most incredible crepe from a street vendor.” With eyes widened in disbelief, years later, she now reminisces about the crepe that started it all. It was warm. Gooley. She lifts a delicate, griddle-scarred hand up with a pause, as if grasping for the right word.

Unbelievable. All of the flavors were there, a perfect complement to one another, yet each individual ingredient was clear to a knowing tongue.

Inspired by the years of pining over the fated Irish crepe, Day-Boykin, along with partner Nessa Higgins opened up an Airstream trailer on South Lamar that serves a variety of sweet and savory European crepes with a Texas spin.

Many people who would stop by in the trailer’s early days, were unsure what exactly they were going to be eating. In describing the frequent scene, Day-Boykin lets out a breath of a laugh, as she had trouble explaining in detail to potential customers what a crepe actually was and why they should eat it in Austin of all places.

“Finally, I just told people it was a French version of a burrito!” she exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air in amusement.

What began as mom-and-pop taco carts dotting South Lamar and South First in the 1990s were eventually overpowered by new and innovative niches in cuisine with the mobile food explosion of the 2000s. Patrick Gannon, Day-Boykin’s husband, could recall when the only food sold in the streets of Austin was tacos and tamales, which can still be found sprinkled along South First Street and littered throughout East Austin.

“I told Andrea, *‘There is something here, beyond Mexican food’* in trying to

convince her to open up her own [trailer],” Gannon said, the pride in his wife clear in his crystal eyes and quiet hands.

If there was anywhere to open an innovative new eatery, Gannon knew it was Austin, having lived there for several years prior. From that, came one of the first modern incarnations of the Austin food trailer, Flip Happy Crepes, a trailer founded in 2006.

Many trailer owners find themselves at a crossroads when they find success in their business: open more trailers or move to a brick-and-mortar restaurant. With both women having families and children, the flexibility of owning a trailer, rather than owing high rent on a restaurant every month, gives them a chance to run their business the way they chose, taking time off to decompress and focus on their families several weeks of the year. Moving to a full-scale restaurant would only deprive the women of that sacred time.

Back in the trailer, the women move effortlessly around one another, hands to one another’s backs and hips as they slide by with their own task to keep up with the constant flow of orders. Although the summer heat and the close quarters to griddles causes beads of sweat to form upon their brow, they have no intention expanding into a brick-and-mortar in the near future.

Flip Happy isn’t known for its wait service, but when the moment strikes, the intimacy they share with customers is difficult to match in a larger environment. From mixing the crepe batter in a giant metal bowl to calling first names out a window for each order, they find pride and joy in every step of the process. During a slow moment on a

weekday, Andrea Day-Boykin notices that a table of two young women finishing their lunch. Right on cue, she brings out a tray of the sweet Nutella crepes they ordered for dessert with a gentle smile before retreating back to the trailer to finish out the lunch orders.

## **Chapter Four: Gourdough's**

A playful, stout doughnut drawn upon a silver trailer tips his hat and monocle to incoming customers declaring, "Hungry? Order here!" A crowd begins to form around the five-foot-tall menu at Gourdough's gourmet doughnut trailer in the heat of a September afternoon in 2010. Unlike many trailers whose line appears at the window for minutes, and even hours in some cases, Gourdough's trouble is in deciding what to order. Handmade, oversized donuts overflow the paper checkerboard bowls that are handed out the window and the menu declares over twenty-five combinations.

Inside the trailer, owner and attorney-by-day Ryan Palmer relieves his afternoon employee. Within moments, he flies around the trailer, slicing a banana so quickly, the knife moves in a blur. Back and forth, he zips between tasks like a six-foot-two hummingbird in his own performance up and down the line. He tosses the slices onto a griddle with a loud sizzle, and an aromatic steam instantly rises and fills the entire trailer, dancing with the smells of bacon frying on the other end. With a variety of menu items and a small crew -- usually one person manning the trailer at all times, except when shifts overlap -- comfortable shoes and being light on one's feet is a requirement for Gourdough's.

Palmer widens his stance in concentration as he slides a spatula of peanut butter back and forth atop of donut until it melts like a glaze over the sides and under the parchment paper below. Sliding it down the conveyor belt like his own personal cafeteria. Chocolate syrup. Sprinkles. Fresh strawberries. Chicken strips fresh out of the fryer warming under a hot light.

The owners, Palmer and his girlfriend-slash-real estate partner, Paula Samford, are a prime example of stumbling into the trailer business. The couple's background lies in real estate, but traveled between New York City, New Orleans and Tulsa with ventures in graphic design, law and construction – none of which holding a relation to bacon-topped, heart-stopping doughnuts. After years of prodding by friends who had come to favor Samford's family recipe – a six inch wide, shortcake-textured doughnut – the two had already been settled in Austin for a few years with Samford's real estate company. The trailer opened in 2009, just in time for the Austin City Limits music festival taking place just down the street at Zilker Park. It was a strong opening and by staying open late afternoons and well after sunset, they had developed a following over a single weekend.

In 2010, Palmer didn't see his business "going anywhere anytime soon," but in December 2011, the lot upon which the trailer stood on South Lamar was sold to a developer, giving the trailers a short amount of time to pack up and find another place to call home. Just a month later, the engine-less vehicle popped up just a third of a mile east on South First street, sharing the space with Izzoz Tacos's renovated and expanded trailer.

As of April 2012, the lot is surrounded by a chain-link fence and the developer's mysterious signs, failing to inform the public of what will soon take the spot of another unique piece of Austin.

The move didn't hurt business. Rather than opening late afternoon, as Gour dough's did at their old location in 2010, they've expanded their weekday hours in time for the morning rush at seven and stay open until midnight. With its location close

to downtown and easy access on South First, the trailer services coats and ties on their way to corporate jobs in the city center. On Friday and Saturdays, they remain open well after last call, servicing the breakfast, lunch, dinner and after-party snack crowds mostly consisting of young hipsters and college students until three a.m.

In addition to expanded hours, the owners expanded their crew. With two windows in the trailer, a young woman lingers in the darkness just inside the first window, while the tattooed sleeve of a man hangs outside the windowsill of the other, greeting customers as they pass the trailer. “Here for a doughnut?” he questions a group of girls studying the menu. It’s an improvement on Palmer’s graceful rush around the trailer nearly two years earlier and a nod to overcoming obstacles in a rocky economic climate.



## Chapter Five: Ice Queens

Women clad in hot-pants, leggings and a rainbow of hair colors whirl around the roller rink on a Wednesday evening. There's no music to be heard, no flashing lights or cliché-driven disc jockey over the sound system – simply a whoosh of air as each woman flies by at record speed, over a dozen falling to the ground instantly as a whistle blows from the center of the rink. As the team slips off their skates in their makeshift locker room of the food court area of Millennium Skate Center, a murmur begins as the glistening sweat and hearty breathing begin to subside and the women fall into their everyday personas once again.

"Are we going? Are they opening? Are you gonna go?"

A curvaceous redhead known as Devil Grrl jumps up on a bench, waving her arms back and forth after several minutes of prowling the area, taking a tally of post-practice plans from the women. "Ice Queens! Rosewood and 11th!"

Few words were needed to convey the post-practice after-party, where a lot filled with families and children seeking a post-school treat during the weekdays turns into a private, tiki-torch illuminated party, filled with ruckus, loud cackles of laughter and some of the most rough and rowdy entertainment a group of women well-known for their aggressive antics can create.

A bright red firecracker of a trailer, and one of the smaller mobile food establishments in terms of square footage, the Ice Queens stands in the back parking lot of a local spa. It's a blink-and-you-miss-it spot, but once the hand-painted Ice Queens sign attracts customers down from the road, the tiny trailer comes into view, flanked on

either side by rainbow yard flamingos, repurposed sherbet-colored tables and chairs from the 1960s. A rainbow of colors listed on a sign near the window greet customers with as many sno-ball flavors to make the most indecisive person spend their entire afternoon changing their order.

Texas Rollergirls Devil Grrl and Runaway Tre, also known as co-owners Amy Hutchins and Tre Gaardner, sling a rainbow of bottles as they pour syrup into paper cones of finely packed and shaven ice, handing one after the other out the sticker-cluttered window to their fellow teammates.

It wasn't a life-long derby-fueled dream that brought the self-proclaimed "best sno-balls in the United States" to fruition, but a forced change of plans. Hutchins, the trailer's founder, graduated from the University of Texas with a once-deeply rooted passion in broadcasting and graphic design.

Though she is proud of her education in Radio-Television-Film, she isn't the type to be frolicking around Austin in longhorn-littered paraphernalia, often opting for a uniform of leggings and short-shorts, camouflage and a collection of roller derby-related tees. Her hair sits atop her head in a loose Crayola-red ponytail that mimics the color of the trailer, and as she speaks, sways back and forth on either side of her head.

There is a force to be reckoned with inside Hutchins, a slow-simmering creativity and wild streak that was seen through her former career as a videographer for broadcast news in the Austin area. After losing her job in 2009 due to layoffs and budget cuts, she was, in her own words, to the point of "being completely lost and a bit betrayed." The very thing she had spent so much time, money and heart pursuing leaving her

unemployed for nearly a year as she struggled to get back on her feet.

“I thought that it would be easy for someone with my experience to get a job again, but I was wrong,” Hutchins admitted. After an interview or two, she realized it was time to reevaluate her journey. She had come to a crossroads in a tough economy landscape. She could continue mailing resumes with little success or take a new direction.

The answer was simple and seemingly appropriate for her Honky Tonk Heartbreaker mindset: give up working for the man in a corporate environment. With a nest egg accumulated over the years, Hutchins purchased such little red mobile restaurant with cash. She opened the little screened window for business in 2010, a year after the initial idea of her own business was put into motion.

Tired of working for someone who had the opportunity to snip the string of her livelihood, she knew it was time to play by her own rules. The rules by which trailer owners abide by: be your own boss, set your own hours; work to live, not live to work.

“If we want to open the trailer up for our [roller]girls, we can. If we want to have a party for friends, we can. If we want to go out of town, we can –“ It doesn’t take long for Tre Gaardner, the Ice Queens co-owner with a classic pin-up girl smile and a mild-mannered personality, to finish Hutchins’ sentence: “—And we can go to nationals and not feel guilty about it.”

The nationals Gaardner refers to is the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association’s year-end tournament, that showcases the nation’s best roller derby teams. As one of the team’s captains, Hutchins, along with teammate Gaardner, find themselves in the midst of training at least ten hours per week a majority of the year. With dozens of women in

the league and thousands of fans in the Austin area, the trailer is in no shortage of free marketing during the derby season.

Owning a trailer and whipping roller girls around a rink isn't the only thing on their collective plate. With the trailer closed during the winter months – “Who wants a sno-ball in the cold?” – Hutchins finds herself freelancing as a graphic designer to make ends meet. Gaardner doesn't veer too far from her tough Runaway Tre alter ego as a motorcycle safety instructor, complete with a tight leather jacket, combat boots and a helmet tucked under one arm, her long black hair enveloping her in a silky cloud, adding an air of femininity to her strong, soft-spoken persona of everyday life.

## Chapter Six: Controversy and the Future

Unfortunately, the food trailer business doesn't always share the same camaraderie Hutchins and Gaardner's fellow roller girls share season after season.

Speaking on the cozy community of trailers in Austin, Hutchins's mood changes from the jokes and the usual wide, lipstick-painted grin, as her voice quiets to something much more sincere.

"We have a tight-knit group of people willing to speak on [trailers'] behalf in the community," Hutchins said. "There is always someone there to stand up for us and our rights as business owners at [city] meetings."

Controversy began to cloud over the food trailer community in late 2010, as several Austin restaurant owners proposed a set of regulations for trailers to better match "brick and mortar" restaurant regulations, a matter in which its motives have been questioned by the trailer community.

Food trailers in Austin have grown 20 percent each year since 2006, and currently, there are more than 1,300 permits for mobile food vendors within the city of Austin, doubling the number of "mobile" vendors in four years.<sup>4</sup> While some consider the hip trailers in some of Austin's most popular spots a trend, with every trend comes a backlash.

Tom Ramsey, owner of Snappy Snacks, a catering company with over 70 food trucks in the area, has often been painted the villain in the battle for tighter regulations after requesting changes in regulations in eating establishments across the board,

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<sup>4</sup> Mick Vann, "Curbside Cuisine Goes Big in Austin," *Austin Chronicle*, May 21, 2010.

including restaurants housed in buildings and their counterparts, food trucks and trailers.<sup>5</sup>

In May, Ramsey came before the city council with 42 rules and regulations that his research, stemmed by being cited by the city for his own trailers violating code regulations, found many of his competitors were not honoring. The list was pared down to ten and voted on formally by the city council in September, but Ramsey continues to push to instate a number of the other 32 rules next year.

Among those ten new regulations, six were approved to be enforced October 1, 2010. All vendors, including carts, trucks and trailers, are required proof of sales tax permits, post truck routes in advance, pass a inspection by the Fire Department, provide a restroom on site or written permission for nearby businesses' use of facilities, and "document use of central food preparation facilities and provide notarized certification of the facilities."<sup>6</sup>

While many of the standards proposed by local business owners apply to those vendors who conduct business with an engine within their establishment, there is a distinctly gray area of those merchants who are considered mobile, but have not moved their establishment since they opened their trailer door to the public, such as the case of Ice Queens and a majority of other trailers in the area. They are not mobile, but they are not inside a stable building either.

Still relatively new to the scene, trailers face a challenge of proving themselves as a new monster in the food industry in Austin. Other cities, such as Los Angeles, New

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<sup>5</sup> Juan Castillo, "Food Trailers Wary of City Rules Review," *Austin American-Statesman*, May 2, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Juan Castillo, "Food Trailers Wary of City Rules Review," *Austin American-Statesman*, May 2, 2010.

York City and San Francisco have dealt with the regulations of mobile food vendors for years, but the explosion of trailers into foods outside of taco and hot dog carts still poses a challenge.<sup>7</sup>

A problem cited by many is the fact that despite the trailers' popularity, they do not and cannot bring in the revenue their "permanent" counterparts can.

Tips are often overlooked outside of a tip jar, often slightly out of sight, inside the order window. The weather is a strong factor on how well business may do for the day, as the most protection costumers have from the elements are an umbrella over a picnic table, something brought to attention of Ellen Kinsey, owner of South Austin's cake ball food trailer, Holy Cacao.

"People were hardly clamoring at the opportunity to stand in line at a trailer and sit in a dusty parking lot," Kinsey wrote on her blog in May. "Traditional restaurants, however, with their air-conditioned dining experience, did just fine."<sup>8</sup>

With Ramsey's initial proposal, he suggested limiting the hours of vendors, including closing trailers between the hours of midnight and six a.m. Trailers have limited services hours and days, often to accommodate demand and the schedules of the owners, who are often the cooks, cashiers and waitresses, in addition to their side jobs as freelance writers, web designers, and real estate agents. Limiting the hours, as Ramsey suggested, would ultimately put many trailers and trucks, which cater to the late-night

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<sup>7</sup> Adam Nagourney, "Inspectors in Rearview as Food Trucks Rule Road," *New York Times*, October 11, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Ellen Kinsey, "Death Penalty for the Austin Trailer Scene?" May 3, 2010.

crowds, out of business.<sup>9</sup>

Amy Hutchins doubts the regulations will help the stability of being a small business owner in an already shaky economy. Hutchins says that starting a small business is a difficult venture in itself, but adds that holding businesses who don't bring in a profit like restaurants goes against what much of Austin's "Keep Austin Weird" mantra represents.

"I finally found something that I really enjoy doing every day," Hutchins said. "If the new regulations put me out of business because I can't afford to run a full-blown restaurant out of my trailer, instead of serve food out of a trailer like we've always done, what am I supposed to do?"

Stationary vendors, including Hutchins, aren't sitting in silence. Petitions have circled the city, and many trailer owners, including Holy Cacao and Torchy's Tacos, have taken to informing the public on the issue that appears to be overlooked by the public on their blogs and websites, and taking the issue to city meetings.

Despite only a handful of the initial regulations being put into place in October, many restaurant owners are still fighting for more control on how trailers are run, and as a representative of Amy's Ice Cream said at a council meeting, it only seemed fair to "even the playing field" between food service businesses Austin.

Many trailer owners, including Ellen Kinsey of Holy Cacao, cite an unfair advantage, saying that the average food trailer brings in about \$50,000 per year, versus the "brick and mortar" restaurant's \$1 million per year, and that the regulations they are

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<sup>9</sup> Juan Castillo, "Food Trailers Wary of City Rules Review," *Austin American-Statesman*, May 2, 2010.



still fighting include more than \$34,000 in fees simply to keep the doors open.<sup>10</sup>

Trailers fear that with the restaurant's influence on the city, and their insecurity against the food trailer competition will run many of the grassroots businesses into the ground within a few years.

Kinsey, however, offers a biting, yet simple solution and challenge to restaurant owners: "If [trailer owners] have an 'unfair advantage,' why don't restaurants open a trailer and compete with us?"<sup>11</sup>

The probability of mobile eateries taking over the restaurant business in Austin is slim. While owners of the small businesses are willing to defend their right to serve against larger, stationary businesses, the fear seen in restaurants is similar to comparing apples and oranges. Unlike brick-and-mortar establishments, trailers still battle limited seating, limited hours as generally outdoor venues per city regulations, and the weather.

Most recently, residents of food trailer courts are finding themselves displaced as developers buy up the once-empty lots close to downtown. As of April 2012, one of the most well-known food courts, just east of I-35 on Sixth Street, was given their notice to vacate. Some trailers have already gone the way of East Side Kings' popular trailer by relocating in the parking lots of the many bars in the area, while others are searching to transfer to yet another empty lot to create a new collection of trailers.<sup>12</sup>

The South Lamar lot that hoisted both Gour dough's and Odd Duck to national

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<sup>10</sup> Ellen Kinsey, "Death Penalty for the Austin Trailer Scene?" May 3, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Ellen Kinsey, "Death Penalty for the Austin Trailer Scene?" May 3, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Tiffany Harelik, "East Side Drive In Closes: Food trailers forced to relocate from the East Sixth Street lot," *CultureMap*, April 6, 2012.

fame through shows on the Food Network and appeared in *Bon Appetit* and the *New York Times* is now surrounded by a tattered construction fence of metal and hunter green tarp. Not a single trailer is in sight. Construction workers sit on the edge of the sidewalk outside the fence, lunch pails and hard hats at their sides as they eat sandwiches on white bread. This is an ironic twist given that the food normally consumed from the food trailers at this intersection just months before was an eclectic mixture ranging from chicken strip-topped donuts, as big as a child's head, to gourmet, soft poached eggs on a bed of spinach just months before.

Despite the challenges posed as developers take over prime locations in the city, the culture remains strong. Since 2011, trailers have moved beyond the immediate downtown and campus areas. Some have gone as far as Bee Caves and San Marcos. Farther south, San Antonio recently approved mobile food in designated areas downtown.

Grassroots goes corporate. Just as Austin City Limits music festival and South by Southwest grew exponentially in a few short years, the trailer culture is following in its footsteps. The community even got an illustrious stamp of approval by C3 Productions, the powerhouse behind local and national music festivals.

The first Gypsy Picnic trailer food festival was held in November 2010 as a nod to the expanding trailer community. Starting as a seed planted in food blogger Tiffany Harelik's mind after writing about the growing culture for a year, she teamed up with C3 in early 2010 to plot a festival showcasing the best of mobile food in Austin.

Not only did the festival reel in mobile food loyalists, its promotion around the city – both by C3 and participating trailers – brought a new audience to trailer food and

according to several media sources at the time, pulled mobile food into the mainstream in Texas. What was once underground and loyally “weird” in the Austin definition of the word had now become something bigger than itself. No longer was eating from a trailer “hit or miss” or shady, as many patrons feared in the past.

Harelik hopes that the legacy she has started with the help of Austin businesses will continue on for decades to come, proud to have started something “quirky” and perfectly Austin.<sup>13</sup>

“When I'm an old woman, I want to hear people say 'Remember that first Gypsy Picnic?' just like I hear people talking about Aquafest,” Harelik said.

As food trailers in Austin grow into festivals, books and national television shows in the last five years, its popularity and acceptance in the edible landscape only grows. The tight-knit community of business owners works in tandem with the City of Austin to collaborate on creating new laws and regulations – and the occasional battle – and proves the recent growth is anything but a trend. Food trailers have become as much a part of Austin as the live music, the University of Texas and the pride of lifelong Austinites and recent transplants. Though the neon "Open" sign that sits in the window of these trailers may flicker from time to time, the light within these businesses won't be fizzling out anytime soon.

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<sup>13</sup> Tiffany Harelik, “First-ever Gypsy Picnic,” *Trailer Food Diaries*, November 12, 2010.

## Appendix



A neon, handpainted sign sits atop a trailer at the 2009 Austin City Limits music festival in Austin, Texas.



View toward downtown at the South Congress trailer court.



A young girl sits at a picnic table with a snow cone bought from a South Congress food trailer in March 2012.



Customers wait in line at Hey Cupcake on South Congress.



A customer orders at The Mighty Cone on South Congress in 2010.



Atmosphere at The Mighty Cone in 2010.



Bryce Gilmore, owner of Odd Duck Farm to Trailer. Austin, Texas 2010.



An employee seasons potatoes prior to grilling inside the Odd Duck Trailer.





Bryce Gilmore, owner, supervises employees inside the trailer prior to opening.



Atmosphere at Flip Happy Crepes in Austin, Texas.



Nessa Hill and Andrea Day-Boykin, owners of Flip Happy Crepes, read an order inside of their trailer in Austin, Texas in 2010.



Day-Boykin cooks an omelet on the griddle inside the Flip Happy Crepes trailer.



Day-Boykin garnishes a ham and gruyere crepe.



Atmosphere at Gour dough's in South Austin.



Ryan Palmer, owner of Gour dough's, lathers up a fresh doughnut with maple syrup.



Ryan Palmer, owner, takes orders at the window of Gour dough's.



Doughnuts fry in oil inside the Gourdough's trailer.





Amy Hutchins and Tre Gaardner, co-owners of Ice Queens. East Austin, 2010.



Tre Gaardner pours syrup over a sno-ball for a customer inside the trailer.



Tre Gaardner punches a hole in a frequent customer card inside the trailer.



Amy Hutchins chats with a customer inside the trailer.



Customers are reflected in the window of the Sno-Beach trailer in South Austin.



Austin food trailers bring in a range of customers, including families.



A customer picks up a cone of fries from The Mighty Cone on South Congress.



The Short Bus trailer is illuminated well after dark in 2012.

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