

BY OLIVIER BJÖRKSÄTER-BLEYLOCK

THE STREET FOOD RENAISSANCE



New York's multicultural street food is unrivalled... but that's all about to change on the domestic front.

I've eaten street food all over the world, sampling everything from the sweet, the sour, the soft-shelled, and the severely sugar-coated; most of it jam-packed full of flavours hot off the press... and some of it not so much. As any street food connoisseur will tell you, a hearty *al pavement* meal is second to none in terms of its diversity, great taste, and availability but always involves taking your stomach into your own hands, hopefully not literally.

In search of authentic, affordable dining, I've grappled with nuclear-sauced doner kebabs in Istanbul; I've sucked on spiced duck bills while squatting on a child's stool in a Bangkok gutter; tackled the mighty meat pie outside a Brisbane footy stadium, an attempt on the classic 'floater' in a messy sea of mushy peas; tacos eaten on a roadside in Mexico which dealt God's wrath; khinkali meat dumplings from the old Lenin Square in Tbilisi did the same; a variety of fruits I'd never heard of in Laos; an entire taxonomy of chillies in India; and, in an extreme case of paddock-to-plate dining, a variety of toasted bugs in Hong Kong's thriving street market districts.

But nowhere else in the world will you find street food at its best than in New

York City where everything is crammed tight, her people and their habits too. Meals are squeezed into the temporal crawlspaces between meetings and shifts. Restaurants lurk in any corner they can find, so food crops up in the oddest places. But culinary life isn't confined to restaurants. Harried commuters rushing to board a train scarf down a bite from all manner of meals-on-wheels: Aluminium street food carts, mail trucks converted into kitchens, humble stainless steel trailers. This isn't only a New York thing, of course. But this is: Within the space of a few blocks, there's a breadth and density of street food from nearly every continent and a passion for its refinement. And for under \$10, an atlas of food can be yours.

In the same way that pop-ups and supper clubs are renegotiating the restaurant experience, street food is all about making food fun. And it's ridiculously on-trend. Even with a global financial crisis sequel looming, street food is still very affordable. But, at the same time, the best of the traders make sense of all those highfalutin concepts that food journalists bandy around – like 'fresh' (because it's cooked right in front of you, and not left waiting around in the kitchen), and 'seasonal' because traders tend to grab whatever is cheapest at the market. At no more than \$5 a serving, these traders work on very tight margins.

On the local scene and the word is that street food is set to transform our obsession

with food even more. Our most famous street food vendor has to be *Harry's Cafe de Wheels*. It's a true Australian icon; this unassuming roadside caravan in Sydney serving pies and peas has become an unbelievable celebrity and tourist attraction which also happens to remain perennially in fashion amongst the local Sydneysiders. But it's not just vendors looking to cash in on the trend, but restaurateurs and leading chefs from our industry. The evidence is already there to see, with many top chefs moving into the casual dining market with a fast food twist. The appeal of extending yourself into the street is that it can serve very well as another vehicle, no pun intended, to promote your food offering as well as your brand. With this in mind, what's to say clubs can't capitalise on this trend and move out into the street?

Well, it's all about to be made possible with food trucks scheduled to hit our streets for the first time this year. The City of Sydney is inviting expressions of interest from operators who can deliver gourmet-style take-away food from vehicles that will move between different locations in the city. The pilot program is one of several measures the city is taking to improve and diversify its nightlife offering.

"People have been telling us it's hard to get a restaurant-quality meal in Sydney after 10pm, and they want more access to quality casual dining," says Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore. "Mobile food trucks

can help fill the role of providing high quality food at different places throughout the night. Around the world, these businesses offer good quality food and a welcoming vibe. They've generated a real sense of excitement around their businesses and we want to bring that excitement to Sydney."



The city recently hosted workshops that attracted more than 30 participants keen to trial food truck ideas. Ten of the most interesting and innovative ideas have been picked for the pilot program, which kicks off this month and runs for a year. "We want sole traders, companies, and registered food businesses that can prepare, cook, and sell high-quality away food that captures the essence of Sydney as an exciting street food destination," adds Moore.

The City will help those taking part in the trial by slashing red tape that can currently make it hard for permanent mobile food businesses to get established, including making spaces in the city available for the food trucks, and helping operators to ensure all health and worker safety requirements are met. While site details where the trucks will operate are yet

to be confirmed, they'll deliberately not include areas close to existing cafes and restaurants.

"This isn't about driving away customers from existing food outlets. It's about increasing options where none currently exist. We want to encourage new and innovative ideas that will add life to the city, while also supporting existing businesses. This is about diversity, but we also fully support existing operators and businesses," explains City of Sydney's Night Time Economy manager, Suzie Matthews.

With the big new food carts trend creating an explosion of high-class street eats around the world, this is an opportunity worth considering if your club is positioned away from the main thoroughfare in your local town centre and are looking to encourage increased patronage. Surprisingly, it's actually relatively straightforward to get a license. In theory, you just need to apply and be prepared for inspections. The difficulty, however, lies in getting a pitch. This is where prospective traders place their fate in the hands of local authorities. Some seem to prefer to concentrate vendors

together in designated areas to cut down on obstructions for pedestrians, unfair competition, and safety risks.

The other attraction is that street food is cheap food, meaning it's popular...but that may have something to do with the social atmosphere it creates in the street. And if done well, street food can taste better than almost anything in the world. The problem with restaurants is that they hermetically seal you from the process of food preparation. You can't smell the spit of butter in the pan, or the wisps of smoke off the grill, and that detracts from the anticipation and therefore the pleasure of eating. But with street food you're close to the action; smell and taste become one.

With street food tipped to take off, if you're interested in finding out more about this concept, simply jump online and visit www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au. Meanwhile, for some great street food recipe ideas, look no further than Meat & Livestock Australia's innovative and inspiring street food, burger, and sandwich recipes using beef and lamb masterpieces. If you'd like a free copy for your club, simply visit www.mla.com.au where you can either download an electronic version or request a hardcopy for your kitchen. ■

WASTE NOT, WANT NOT

After every club function, restaurant sitting, or catered outdoor event, the food scraps created are destined to become highly undesirable organic waste. Clubs constantly battle to eliminate the stench of rotting food scraps stored for garbage collection. With soaring transport costs, expensive tipping charges, and rotting organic waste creating both unwanted greenhouse gases and poisonous leachates, the need for a sustainable solution is clear.

Fortunately the solution is available and successfully demonstrated in a most unusual place – the Royal Melbourne Golf Club during the *President's Cup* golf tournament late last year. Eco Guardians operated a Gaia Organic Waste Recycling unit to process the organic waste produced during the event, from the bacon and eggs

at breakfast to the corporate luncheons of seafood, meat platters, salads, and all manner of snacks in between.

"The Gaia recycling system breaks down and ferments organic waste whilst the moisture content is driven off and condensed for draining without any pollution risk," explains Paul Moynes from Eco Guardians. "Alternatively, it can be recovered for use as grey water on site. The volume of waste is reduced by 85-90% during the process, and due to the high temperature inside the chamber, all pathogens and seeds are rendered inactive. Furthermore, we've eliminated the need for costly transportation of waste to landfill and reduced greenhouse gas emissions by up to 80% compared with landfill dumping."

The biomass produced by the Gaia unit was handed over to the Royal Melbourne Golf Club to assist with the rehabilitation of the course which inevitably results from hosting such a major event. "That's the beauty of the mobilising Gaia Recycle units, we take the solution to the problem," adds Moynes. "The Gaia Recycle system is entirely scalable and can process anywhere from 15 kilograms to 100 tonnes of organic waste per day."

For more information on how Eco Guardians can assist your club with waste management, visit www.ecoguardians.com.au ■

