

## Pies on the Road

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### Charting a new course with a mobile pizza kitchen



For restaurateurs, tough economic times are often the birthplace of creativity.

Instead of giving up on their pizzeria dreams during the recession, operators took to the streets. Between 2009 and 2014, the food truck industry grew by an annual rate of 12.5 percent, according to IbisWorld. Opting to bypass a brick-and-mortar location with a mobile pizza kitchen had numerous benefits during this time, including lower overhead and the opportunity to get a toehold in the restaurant business.

Today, mobile kitchens continue to roll on, fueled by factors like the chance to reach consumer demand in a variety of locations, express creativity in branding and marketing and, finally, an opportunity to work in an environment outside the traditional restaurant setting.

Thirty-five-year pizzeria veteran Jim Sims considers the upbeat vibes of the festivals his Texas-based trailer (J & R Pizza Concession) frequents to be another perk of going mobile. He runs an 8½- by 25-foot aluminum trailer containing a four-deck pizza oven, two eight-cubic foot freezers and a 100-pound propane bottle, along with other kitchen equipment, signage and miscellaneous accessories needed to assemble a makeshift kitchen.

Sims uses the freezers at his house to store ingredients and assembles them upon arrival at an event. For shipping ingredients with ease, he often orders ingredients in bulk for delivery to his house or pizza trailer's door.

In the Sacramento area, Scott Thorson, owner of Bella Familia Wood Fired Pizza, has been hauling two wood-fired pizza trailers for the past eight and a half years to events like farmer's markets, weddings and rehearsal dinners.

To store ingredients like flour and cheese, shred mozzarella and prepare items like dough and appetizers, Thorson rents a commissary space in a commercial kitchen. He procures most vegetables from the farmer's market the day of an event.

Thorson uses mainly cambros and coolers for shipping and advises operators to stay aware of outdoor temperatures and adjust their use of ice packs accordingly. He also recommends packing only the items you're guaranteed to use, making them dual purpose when possible. For instance, he uses decorative boxes to carry napkins and plates and then flips them over to embellish tables.

To set prices, Thorson used trial and error, along with researching the rates of other local caterers with similar businesses and decided to start \$18 a person for catered events.

Sims charges \$5 per slice from a 15-inch pizza cut into four.

The price “is more than twice what I used to get in my restaurant,” comments Sims. “We run about an eight- or nine-percent profit margin, which is phenomenal.”

On the other hand, determining where to park mobile kitchens is often not a smooth ride.

“Most towns and cities have non-friendly food truck laws for day-to-day vending,” cautions Rob Mitchell, president of the Philadelphia Mobile Food Association and Board Member of the National Food Truck Association.

For instance, in Tulsa, the Andolini’s Pizzeria food truck must be parked 150 feet from the front door of any brick and mortar restaurant. And in many cities, lucrative areas require extra licenses or prohibit mobile restaurants. Thorson is building a food truck because new laws in some counties prohibit his pop-up tents from setting up at breweries and wineries.

But mobile operators needn’t despair: These restrictions have inspired a flourishing mobile event scene and opportunities for catering private events abound. Still, while mobile kitchen proponents are lobbying for more ideal laws for vendors, Mitchell recommends operators research current laws in their area to determine where they can set up shop.

For pizzeria operators with both a storefront and mobile units, maintaining consistency between their mobile and stationary locations also demands consideration.

Mike Bausch, owner of three locations of Andolini’s Pizzeria in the Tulsa area, takes a comprehensive approach. First, employees train at a brick and mortar Andolini’s before stepping onto the food truck. Cameras also ensure product quality and the same quality controls, cleaning list, secret shoppers and recipes at the Andolini’s stationary locations also apply at the food truck.



When they’re ready for business, mobile operators market on the road and the web.

J & R Pizza Concession uses a variety of marketing avenues, including advertising in local papers and joining sites that feature roaming trucks at caterers.

In addition to social media marketing, Andolini’s Pizzeria has found that building a standalone food truck Web site (linked to their brick and mortar site) is a simple way for customers to locate their food truck.

Social media-wise, Thorson mainly uses Facebook, where he buys ads or posts on his page. Both sides of his trailers display their logo, company name and phone number, along with the phrase: “Catering & Events.” And, at the farmer’s markets he attends twice a week, he writes “We cater or “Ask about catering” on a chalk menu and hands out business cards, brochures and postcards to attendees. However, it’s seeing his mobile units in person — with their unique wood-fired trailers -- that produce the most buzz.

“If I show you a picture of my trailer, that’s great,” says Thorson. “But that’s just a two-dimensional image, whereas at a farmer’s market you get to take the whole thing in.”

**More on ways to drive your mobile units to success**

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**Carimé Lane is a freelance writer who writes about health and the restaurant business from Vancouver, B.C.**

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