

Food trucks change lanes to get through COVID-19 pandemic

From catering to frozen meals to home delivery, they've made major changes to survive the last 18 months.

By **Angela Yang** Globe Correspondent, Updated August 17, 2021, 4:31 p.m.



Avi Shemtov runs the Chubby Chickpea food truck that has been doing much of its business catering. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

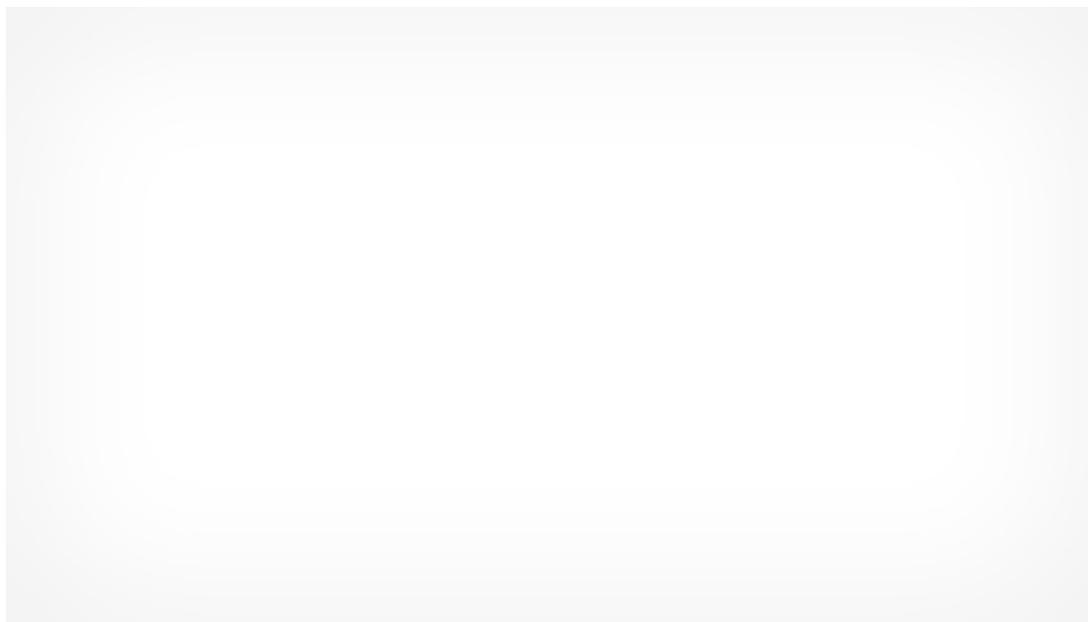
Spring is a big season for the food truck business, a time to recover from the slow, cold winter. So when COVID-19 hit in March 2020, the timing couldn't have been worse. Now, a year and a half later, food trucks are still trying to find their way forward.

They no longer sit along busy downtown streets, waiting for office workers to stop by on lunch breaks. Instead, the once-thriving industry has largely hit the road, turning to catering small events, online orders, and even delivery. Many of these hyperlocal businesses have succumbed to the pandemic, but others have pushed through by finding ways to innovate.

The Chubby Chickpea, which operates two food trucks in various locations around the state, was running on fumes when COVID arrived, coming off a winter of negative cash flow. Owner Avi Shemtov guessed it would take weeks to recover — until the cancellations came flooding in.

“Guests that had given deposits for the upcoming year for private events were all canceling,” Shemtov said. “I refunded something like \$25,000 in a day, and then it got above \$50,000 over a three- or four-day stretch.”

ADVERTISING



With no large-scale catering events nor any other means of selling food, the Chubby Chickpea turned to social media to find business. It worked.

In the depths of the pandemic, Shemtov found folks willing to host his trucks in their neighborhoods. He allowed customers to order ahead via a mobile app before heading

over and essentially vending in their driveways.

“It was definitely a little bit Wild West-ish,” he said. “But it allowed us to bring in some revenue.”

It was enough to survive until this spring, when private catering requests started pouring back in. Now, as corporate offices reopen, Shemtov said, many companies hope to welcome employees back with a hot lunch.

Office buildings aren't the only places food trucks are finding new customers. When The Dining Car halted operations for the first few months of the pandemic, co-owner David Harnik focused on building relationships with Boston's condominium complexes.

When he and his staff were ready to resume, he said, these buildings booked plenty of private catering events with the truck. The Dining Car parks at the front of the building, and residents come down to collect their food, with timed pickup slots to avoid crowding.

“Everything was very orderly and people felt safe, and they were very grateful,” Harnik said. “It wasn't that long ago when people were afraid to go to the supermarket, and so for us to show up and have food at their front door that they could just pick up was great.”

But sales were still not “anywhere near” prepandemic levels without the type of business food trucks had traditionally relied on.

If he wanted to keep The Dining Car running, Harnik knew he'd have to once again cook up new ideas.

“We came up with a number of beautiful meals that we flash froze,” he said. “Really interesting flavors and very eye-catching.”

The Dining Car stocked a selection of frozen meals for customers to purchase and store as quick dinners for later. The pandemic took a “devastating” toll, Harnik said, but business

is returning.

“I don’t think the old model is going to come back just as it was,” Harnik said. “You have to either find new ways to make money given the circumstances or you’re not going to survive, because you can’t just wait for things to return to what they were like before.”

Anne-Marie Aigner adapted, too, transforming operations after Governor Charlie Baker halted large-scale events in March 2020.

For almost a decade, Aigner had run Food Truck Festivals of America, which drew thousands of people to “destination events” around the country.

When the pandemic struck, she laid off employees, forfeited the festival’s physical office, and moved her desk into her house. But she still had connections to hundreds of food trucks.

“I threw something up online and said, ‘With the quarantine and restaurants closed right now, if anybody would like a food truck in their neighborhood, let me know,’” she said. “And I got 200 requests right off the bat.”

And so Food Truck Ventures was born. Now, Aigner’s team connects food trucks around New England to catering opportunities — company lunches, weddings, school banquets, teacher appreciation luncheons, graduations — and fund-raising events for schools and nonprofits.

Neighborhoods that welcomed food trucks saw households set chairs out on their lawns and picnic in front of their homes, waving to neighbors who were doing the same.

“I think people are really inventing new, innovative ways to deal with food, dining, neighbors,” Aigner said.

Still, Aigner sees the damage the pandemic wrought on her industry. Of about 600 food trucks on her contact list for the festivals she used to throw, only about half are still

around.

Some owners have told her they “just can’t do it anymore.” One of Aigner’s personal favorites, Teri-Yummy, shuttered in September after six years on the road in Boston — with no plans to reopen in the future.

“We just knew that, especially with the winter coming, we were not going to last any longer,” former co-owner Fen Chen said.

Before the pandemic, Chen said, Teri-Yummy would serve about 150 customers during its lunch rush each day. That number dropped to maybe 10. Chen tried to pivot, signing up for Uber Eats and Grubhub in hopes of finding more customers.

But the truck had lost 95 to 99 percent of its orders overnight, Chen said, and even after adding delivery was making an average of five sales per day. Catering opportunities were few and inconsistent.

“We sat there all day and just waited for orders to come through,” Chen said. “But there was nothing we really could do.”

Aigner, who’s watched food trucks adapt all through the pandemic, said the past year and a half will serve as a study on how COVID-19 reshaped an industry. Faced with few resources for help, truck owners everywhere were forced to rely on creativity. And for many, that innovative persistence was what saved them.

“It will be a shakeout,” Aigner said. “This is a really hard way to make a living. And that’s why buying from food trucks is not just getting a good meal. It’s also supporting a small business.”

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