

# Food truck debate: Communities weigh in on rising trend

## *Food truck trend rolling into Greater Lansing communities*

Carlos Vasquez and his mother-in-law Penny Urbina each spent two decades in the banking industry, but now their future is riding on a dream — their family recipes dished up from a renovated camper turned food truck.

From Urbina's kitchen table at her home near Eaton Rapids they offer up a pair of empanadas sitting on a small plate. The plump cornmeal pocket crust is filled with meat and potatoes and special spices, a combination that dates back to Vasquez's Colombian mother.

When "Eaton Good" opens for business later this summer on the streets of Eaton Rapids the empanadas will be on the menu, along with Cuban sandwiches filled with roasted pork and ham, Swiss cheese and pickles.

Vasquez and Urbina's food truck is a life-long dream, a second chance at pursuing their passion for food and running a successful small business.

If that sounds far-fetched, it shouldn't.

Food trucks are on the rise nationally. They generate about \$650 million in revenue every year and are "on pace to quadruple" that by 2017, according to a report from the National League of Cities, a nonprofit that advocates for municipalities.

Food trucks have set up shop on the outskirts of St. Johns and in the core of Meridian Township, in Mason, Grand Ledge and throughout Lansing. While vendors are welcome in some communities, the growth in the industry has some towns across the region scrambling to regulate or block them altogether.

At its core, the argument is about whether food trucks adversely affect local restaurants or bring increased vibrancy to communities.

There are plenty of local success stories to point to in the region — food truck owners who have made the leap from a mobile operation to a brick and mortar restaurant.

Food truck owners say the industry is, in many ways, a business incubator, a training ground for brave, hard-working entrepreneurs who may one day set up permanent shop in the community that embraced them.

"It's about creating opportunities for others, inspiring people to follow their dreams," Vasquez, 41, said. "For me, that was part of why I really wanted to do this."

## Debating concerns

As food truck success stories go, Mark and Krysta McGee are probably among mid-Michigan's most recognized.

Two years ago the couple won an episode of Food Network's "Food Court Wars" after a five-year vending stint on Main Street in Eaton Rapids. Their business, Mark's Gourmet Dogs, earned a one-year stay in the Lansing Mall food court.

They still man the cart at special events and on occasions downtown. The McGees closed the mall location in December to return to their hometown and this spring opened Mark's Place, a brick and motor restaurant on the same street where they served food from a cart.

"That was my number one goal to begin with," McGee said.

The Eaton Rapids city councilman said mobile vending launched his business. It built him a loyal following and a good reputation.

But he isn't sure how he feels about a city plan to open a designated food truck court on Hall Street with room for up to six vendors.

"Having that many food trucks in town could be really good," McGee said. "It could be really bad. I don't know."

The fear, he said, is that mobile vendors from outside the community will capture local customers' patronage.

Officials in Charlotte have deeper concerns. The city has no ordinance in place that allows food trucks, but earlier this year the Planning Commission discussed developing one. They set the issue aside after hearing concerns from downtown business owners.

"I don't see this occurring every day in the city of Charlotte," said Tim Lewis, Charlotte's mayor. He said officials are still "open" to the concept of designated times during the year when food trucks are allowed to operate at one location.

Mason business owners aren't all in favor of a recently-passed food truck ordinance there. It allows vendors to park on downtown streets and in business parking lots for an annual fee.

Joe Ghinelli, owner of Courthouse Pub and Grill on Maple Street at 160 W. Maple St. is "livid" about the ordinance, which he said will create a parking problem downtown and could affect his bottom line.

"I consider it an extreme slap in the face to business owners in town," Ghinelli said.

But Brian Rasdale, who owns Bad Brewing Co. at 440 S. Jefferson St., said he believes food trucks will help contribute to the vitality of downtown Mason. "Good Bites" is parked in his parking lot and he said their presence helps, rather than hinders, his business.

"When customers are here in Mason they're not just going to spend money at food trucks," Rasdale said. "They're going to go to other businesses."

When Nina Santucci and her husband Anthony Maiale introduced "The Purple Carrot" five years ago she said several communities, including Meridian Township, had few, if any, regulations in place to police food trucks.

"We'd park anywhere until we were told we couldn't be there," she said. Their motto was "Ask for forgiveness, not for permission."

Their business has thrived. Customers were drawn to the truck's menu, which included unique sandwiches, soups and salads made with local ingredients.

"We just had a crazy first summer," Santucci said. "As fast as we could make food we would sell it."

The couple still operates "The Purple Carrot" but they've put down roots too. Their East Lansing restaurant, Red Haven at 4480 Hagadorn Rd., has been open for just over three years, and Santucci said the food truck was its catalyst.

## A 'narrow-minded' concern

Peter Menser, associate planner for Meridian Township, said officials put regulations in place for food trucks in January. Food vendors are allowed in commercial and business districts, if they have property owner permission and pay a township fee of \$60 for a month or \$240 for four months.

Kevin Cronin, who operates "Daddy's Little Grill" out of Wheat Jeweler's parking lot at 4990 Marsh Rd., said the township's fees are reasonable and their requirements are thorough.

"They were terrific about it," he said. The former Dusty's Cellar chef cooks up items like lobster fritters and shrimp and grits from his truck there, but he said you'll probably never see it in East Lansing. The city updated its food vendor ordinance about four years ago, designating one area off Albert Avenue for up to three food trucks. Vendors must pay an annual fee of \$1,800 to park there.

Currently there aren't any food trucks utilizing the designated area, said Heather Pope, a community development analyst with East Lansing

It's about finding balance with the existing business community, Pope said. "You already have your brick and mortar establishments. Is it fair to have a truck pull up and park there?"

Delhi Township's zoning ordinance takes it a step further. It doesn't allow food trucks at all, said Community Outreach Coordinator Will Kangas. All sales and retail transactions must occur "within a fully enclosed building," he said.

In Lansing there is no ordinance specific to food trucks but mobile vendors must obtain a "peddler and transient merchant" license, said City Councilwoman Carol Wood. There's a \$75 application fee and a \$25 background check requirement. In addition, vendors must obtain the property owner's permission where ever they operate.

There are currently about 13 food trucks licensed to operate in the city, Wood said, adding Lansing officials have no plan to consider a more specific ordinance.

There are signs of support for food trucks in the community. This summer on Aug. 20 a [Food Truck Rally](#) will be offered in Lansing's Old Town.

Food trucks can be a positive factor in urban areas, helping to revitalize areas that were "dead" or struggling economically, said John Gaber, a political science professor at the University Arkansas who has studied urban development and the food truck industry extensively.

There are several examples across the country where food trucks have helped revitalize areas of communities, Gaber said, including Dickson Street in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

"Food trucks are filling these dead spaces and creating a kind of open market space." The notion that they hurt existing businesses is "narrow-minded" and hard to prove, he said, adding that scarcity of food trucks in a community can often be traced to restrictive or cost-prohibitive ordinances.

"Food trucks tend to attract a different customer base than brick and mortar restaurants," Gaber said. "And it's a great source of economic development for local entrepreneurs."

## A genuine experience

Many vendors say their efforts are genuine, and they offer authentic food customers can't get other places.

Francisco Gutierrez opened his truck, Pancho's Taqueria, about a month ago in the parking lot of Sanctuary Spirits in Grand Ledge at 902 E. Saginaw Hwy. The truck serves a small Mexican food menu during the week in his hometown.

He takes pride in the work and loves being "his own boss."

"I get to the truck at around 7 a.m. in the morning and get everything ready for 8 a.m. when we start serving food," Gutierrez said. "People at a food truck, they're not a big company. They're not a big name."

That's one of the reasons Karen Shapiro of Okemos, a New York native, seeks out food trucks when she's out and about. Monday afternoon she sat on the grass next to Gutierrez's truck with her two children, ages 6 and 10, eating tacos they bought there.

"I love food trucks," Shapiro said. "I feel like they serve more authentic food. They're like small little restaurants that have fresh food, and they really care about what they're making."

Chuck Desander's barbecue trailer is on Old US-27 near St. Johns. He's been serving up ribs, chicken and brisket in the parking lot of the V.F.W. Hall for two summers now. In the fall he'll relocate, but he won't go far, setting up shop at Uncle John's Cider Mill. He pays rent for space at both locations, which are outside the city limits. St. Johns doesn't prohibit food trucks, but requires a transient permit.

"Chuckie D's BBQ" is a side gig, an extension of Desander's 20-year catering business, with a loyal following.

"We have people who come back every day," Desander, 48, said. "They ask, 'What's for lunch?' and 'What's for dinner?' Seeing people smile when they sit down to eat is the best part of the job."

Cronin agrees.

"The food truck is very personal," he said. "I'm handing you the food. I think people are interested in good food and they're realizing that food trucks aren't just about sandwiches and simple food."

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## Food trucks in Michigan

Tracking the number of food trucks locally and throughout the state isn't an exact science. Vendors need a "special transitory food unit" license from a county health department to operate, but so do food tents and cart vendors. In 2015, there were a total of 1,658 licenses issued, but it's difficult to narrow down how many of those are food trucks.

There are currently about 20 food trucks licensed in Ingham County. About 12 are licensed in Eaton County and about 13 are licensed in Clinton County.

*Source: Ingham County Health Department, Barry-Eaton District Health Department and the Mid-Michigan District Health Department.*

## Local regulation

Regulation of food trucks varies significantly from community to community. Some communities don't allow them, except during festivals and events. Others have established ordinances that regulate them, outlining fees, locations and hours of operation. Others rely on existing "transit merchant" or "peddlers" licenses that have been on the books for decades.

Here's a breakdown of how area communities handle food trucks:

- New regulations directly address food trucks in East Lansing, Meridian Township, Mason, Williamston, Delta Township and Eaton Rapids.
- Food trucks adhere to existing regulations in Lansing, DeWitt Township, Grand Ledge and St. Johns.
- Food trucks aren't allowed in Delhi Township or Charlotte, except during festivals and events.