

Food fight: Trucks vs. restaurants in some Phoenix-area cities



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Businesses, chambers say location and timing of events need more consideration



(Photo: Rachael Le Goubin/The Republic)

The Valley's growing love affair with food trucks and their ever-expanding culinary possibilities is dishing up controversy in some areas, where owners of traditional restaurants are making it clear they don't want the competition and would prefer the vehicles keep their distance.

In Chandler, where the city is revising regulations to make it easier for food-truck operators to do business, push-back from established restaurants has surfaced. In Mesa, some downtown businesses are worried the city's push to capitalize on light rail's arrival may mean more events with food trucks. And in Gilbert, business leaders say it may be time to reassess the rules surrounding a highly popular Friday night food-truck event in downtown, within a short walk of numerous brick-and-mortar restaurants.

Even as differences arise, one thing is not in dispute: Food trucks are popular, drawing hundreds or even thousands of street-food aficionados seeking a taste of everything from tacos to grilled cheese, lobster to barbecue and much more.

For traditional restaurant owners, that's the problem.



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[Popular Chandler food truck event on Fridays ends](#)

<http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/chandler/2015/08/13/popular-chandler-food-truck-event-fridays-ends/31671947/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin=>

"They're great and nice unless you're competing with them and you're a brick-and-mortar or free-standing restaurant," said Ric Serrano, whose family operates six Serrano's Mexican Restaurants in the southeast Valley, including the original location in downtown Chandler.

Chandler is working on a revision of its city code to make regulations less onerous for the trucks. Serrano said any change should limit food-truck events to areas that are away from clusters of standing restaurants, whether downtown or elsewhere in the city.

"I don't see how allowing them to compete with the restaurants in the area is going to help anything," he said. "We have restaurants here now that compete against each other and we all know what it takes to survive."

In Mesa, similar concerns are arising among some downtown-area restaurant owners.

"We don't have that many (customers) in downtown Mesa now, and the little bit of customers we have they want to take away from our businesses? Why?" said Tony Xanthoutatis, owner of Haven Burgers, located on Main Street on the eastern edge of downtown, across from the Mesa Mormon Temple. "These (trucks) are not local. We fight 365 days a year for business and pay our taxes here. For what? To have the city take away our business?"

His concern was echoed by Kellie Huntington, owner of Sweet Cakes Cafe at 21 W. Main St.

"The brick-and-mortar restaurants stuck it out during (light rail) construction, which was very difficult, and we hung on by a shoelace," she said. "If there were tons of people milling about, I would care less about food trucks, but we're not there yet. We don't have the traffic and the volume."

Finding ways to get along

Food-truck advocates in Chandler and Mesa have been working to duplicate some of the success seen in other Valley cities, such as Gilbert and Phoenix, where regular weekly food-truck events have drawn big crowds.

A Friday night food-truck event was held in south Chandler from April to early August, but was suspended after its temporary event permit expired ([/story/news/local/chandler/2015/08/13/popular-chandler-food-truck-event-fridays-ends/31671947/?hootPostID=7c25a138cebff4781f2ea2a24796d96e](http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/chandler/2015/08/13/popular-chandler-food-truck-event-fridays-ends/31671947/?hootPostID=7c25a138cebff4781f2ea2a24796d96e)). While up and running, the event quickly grew in popularity, starting out with a handful of trucks and growing to as many as 15 on a given night, as hundreds of residents turned out even on hot summer evenings, said Brian Denham, the event organizer.

Since then, Denham has been trying to figure out ways to restart the event, and Chandler continues to work on a plan to make it easier for food-truck operators. Right now, permitting process is costly and time-consuming. An ordinance isn't expected for City Council consideration until October or November. City Council members had asked staff to solicit feedback from restaurants in drafting a proposal.

Denham said local restaurants have posed a challenge in Chandler, with some expressing their opposition at a Chandler Chamber of Commerce meeting several weeks ago.



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(<http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2015/09/11/grand-canyon-mobile-food-trucks-revamped-lodges/72047974/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin=>)

"The brick and mortar representation that was there was vocal and, for the most part, against it," he said. "I'm trying to figure out why they aren't trying to make this work for them rather than vehemently saying they just don't want it."

Food-truck events in downtown Chandler would market the area, drawing more people who would see what's there and make return trips, he said.

In Mesa, an effort to establish regular food-truck events was launched in the Las Sendas area in early September, with the cooperation of the homeowner's association there. Organizer Natascha Ovando-Karadsheh, a Las Sendas resident and former restaurant consultant, said she already has arranged for more events, including on Oct. 2 at Las Sendas and Oct. 16 at Mesa Community College at Southern Avenue and Dobson Road.

Her goal is to stage a Mesa Food Truck Friday (<https://www.facebook.com/MesaFoodieFridays?ref=ts>) each week in a different quadrant of the city. She has been promoting the plan on Facebook.

"I really started with wanting to get more restaurants to come to Mesa, but that's a longer process," she said, citing the city's lack of trendier eateries such as those run by Phoenix-based Fox Restaurant Concepts and others. "I thought if we can demonstrate the demand, the restaurants will follow."

Organizers expected up to 1,000 attendees at the first event Sept. 4, but twice that number turned out, she said.

"The food trucks have offered an opportunity to start-up restaurants. It's adding a richness to our culture, and it's also supporting small business, and that's why I love it," she said. "It's all about building community."

For the most part, food-truck events have found ways to cooperate with cities and traditional restaurants in various parts of the Valley, said Brad Moore, owner of Short Leash Hot Dogs and co-founder of the Phoenix Street Food Coalition.

"I think a lot of people look at it as a way to create some fun relationships and fun events," he said. "A lot of these people who (attend food truck events) end up going inside a place, sitting down, having a beer. So when people approach this as a way to create some fun collaborative relationships, they can reap big rewards."

He cited Phoenix Public Market in downtown Phoenix as an example. It has long hosted Food Truck Friday events, offering its parking lot as the location.

Locations and permits a factor

Some cities have established rules that make it clear when and where events can be held and how close they can get to the downtown areas city leaders often protect.

In Phoenix, for example, regular food truck events are excluded from the downtown core, which extends from Seventh Street to Seventh Avenue east to west, and from Fillmore to Jackson streets north to south. Businesses can invite trucks to their location for a special event, however.

In Tempe, the city excludes them from the Mill Avenue area.

In Scottsdale, food trucks have been a regular part of the Thursday Night Art Walk in downtown but operate with a special-event permit. Such a permit is needed any time more than three trucks gather. Individual food trucks aren't allowed to park in one spot for an extended period.

Mesa is reviewing its ordinance to see if changes are needed, using Gilbert's policy as a possible "starting point," said Gordon Sheffield, zoning/civil hearing administrator. Under the city's current rules, food trucks are classified as "peddlers" and required to obtain a corresponding license. The license allows the truck to operate from the public right of way. Food trucks also can operate in designated industrial zones and with special-event permits on private property, Sheffield said.

In Gilbert, the downtown Food Truck Court has taken off at a time when the area also has seen an explosion of new restaurants opening, transforming the once sleepy area into a crowded and lively scene on Friday nights. The event operates under a town-use permit and sets up on a public street, said Justine Bruno, a town management support analyst.

Bruno said the town has needed to address pedestrian signage, waste disposal, restroom access, parking, cleanliness and operating hours to make the event work. It's not unusual for at least 20 trucks to participate on a given Friday.

Kathy Tilque, president and CEO of the Gilbert Chamber of Commerce, said standing restaurants, for the most part, have co-existed well with the food trucks, but some issues have raised questions about whether another location would be better.

"Food trucks are very trendy and people love to do those sorts of things, but when you're looking at a community and where to place them, you should look at where you need the additional traffic and exposure. Downtown, we already have a lot of traffic and circulation and customers. Do we really need it there on the busiest night of the week?" Tilque said. "I think when Chandler is evaluating all that, they need to dig a little deeper on where this will work, and where it will not work."

Joe Johnston, who operates two restaurants in downtown Gilbert, Joe's Real Barbecue and Liberty Market, said he's not concerned about the food-truck court diverting traffic from his businesses, which have seen an uptick in the past year. Still, he suggested some alternative thinking might help everyone.

"If they were to move the food-truck event to a different night or an area that's not congested already, I don't think the food trucks would lose any revenue," Johnston said. "We're not nervous about them taking away volume, but I'm just concerned about parking load and how the city decides about infrastructure in the area."

Johnston, who also owns Joe's Farm Grill in south Gilbert, added he supports the food-truck movement as a way for small-business owners to get started. He has hosted food-truck events at Agritopia, a south Gilbert farm-based community he established 15 years ago.

Terri Kimble, president and CEO of the Chandler Chamber of Commerce, said her group will not take a formal position on the Chandler ordinance until a proposal is presented. She conceded, however, that there are concerns among some members about food-truck operations.

"Obviously, there has to be some type of regulation. Who is going to take care of the garbage? How are bathrooms handled?" she said. "The brick-and-mortar restaurants, they're the ones here 365 days a year. They're paying the taxes ... People are very passionate on both sides of the issue."

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