



OCTOBER 2010

# Westways

THE MAGAZINE FOR AUTO CLUB MEMBERS

## Roaming Restaurants

A taste of the food-truck phenomenon

**Destination  
family reunions**

**How to maintain  
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Sumant Pardal serves up a lamb frankie from the India Jones Chow Truck. Photograph by Vanessa Stump.

VANESSA STUMP

► **WEB EXTRA** VISIT [AAA.COM/WESTWAYS](http://AAA.COM/WESTWAYS) FOR A FIRST LOOK AT CUNARD'S GLAMOROUS NEW SHIP, QUEEN ELIZABETH



# MEALS ON WHEELS

Take a tour of our favorite L.A. food trucks

BY KEREN ENGELBERG

**C**all it the democratization of gourmet food. The elevation of the roach coach. If you've driven down L.A.'s Miracle Mile at lunchtime or hit The Brig in Venice in the wee hours, you've seen them—or maybe even tried them. They are the new food trucks, and they are not the taco trucks you've known. Certainly, mobile eateries have long been a part of the Los Angeles food scene, but this new breed has upped the ante—with food that pushes the culinary envelope, trucks designed to reflect the lofty ambitions of their owner-chefs, and a community of fans who track their movements via Twitter and other websites.

It's a trend that's taken hold nationwide, beginning in Portland and spreading to L.A., San Francisco, New York, and other cities. In L.A., we can thank Mark Manguera and Roy Choi for inspiring our first cravings with their Kogi truck, which blends Korean and Mexican flavors in such dishes as short rib tacos and kimchi quesadillas. (See "A Conversation With . . . Roy Choi" on page 64.) Their first truck hit the streets two years ago, and today, five roam the Southland, from the San Fernando Valley to Orange County. Many have followed in Kogi's wake—more than 100 trucks dispensing everything from Indian *dosas* (Dosa Truck) to Hawaiian bread breakfast sliders (Buttermilk) to St. Louis barbecue (Barbie's Q). Here are just a handful of our favorites.

VANESSA STUMP

Churro tots  
with iced  
Mexican coffee



The Border Grill Truck



Mary Sue Milliken  
and Susan Feniger

## BORDER GRILL TRUCK

**FIND IT** [bordergrill.com](http://bordergrill.com); [twitter.com/bordergrill](https://twitter.com/bordergrill)

Food trucks may be en vogue these days, but for Susan Feniger and Mary Sue Milliken, chef-owners of the Border Grill restaurants and Ciudad, the Border Grill Truck has been a long time coming.

"We've been talking about it for 15 years," says Feniger. "Taco trucks are where Mary Sue and I have always eaten. It's something that we both really love. We felt like a truck was so in sync with what we do."

The celebrity chefs, a.k.a. the Too Hot Tamales, are known for their gourmet takes on traditional Mexican cuisine. With nouveau food trucks rolling into neighborhoods throughout L.A., it finally seemed like the right time to introduce their own variation: a gourmet taco truck. Decked out in a cool black design, the truck serves some dishes from the Border Grill restaurants (carne asada tacos, green corn tamales), as well as a number of truck-only creations (avocado tacos, churro tots). What they all have in common is Feniger and Milliken's particular modern approach to Mexican favorites.

Dino Moody is a truck supervisor, and he expertly runs the truck five days a week. But fans hoping to interact with Feniger and Milliken sometimes get their wish. "We have great access to customers here," Feniger said while standing inside the truck one recent afternoon. A young man and his mother were at the window, asking what she could recommend that wasn't too spicy.

"Ma'am, we can do anything not spicy," said Feniger, reassuringly.

"I'm from the Midwest. What can I say," the woman apologized.

"I am, too," said Feniger, smiling broadly. "But I like spicy!"

### TRY IT

- **POBLANO QUESADILLA:** roasted poblano chiles, chipotle salsa, and three Mexican cheeses in a handmade flour tortilla
- **GREEN CORN TAMALES:** a take on the green corn tamales served in the restaurant, this variation—with sweet corn, crema, and salsa fresca—comes in a paper cone
- **CHURRO TOTS:** dulce de leche-infused churro bites with cinnamon-sugar are served with fresh whipped cream

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: PETER BARRETT, FRAN GEALER, MATT ARMENDARIZ; OPPOSITE PAGE: VANESSA STUMP



## THE GRILLED CHEESE TRUCK

**FIND IT** [thegrilledcheesetruck.com](http://thegrilledcheesetruck.com); [twitter.com/grlldcheesetruck](https://twitter.com/grlldcheesetruck)

In a city where car culture is blamed for a certain sense of isolation, it's ironic that food on wheels could be bringing back a sense of community. But that's exactly what Michele Grant believes is happening. The chef and co-owner of The Grilled Cheese Truck launched the business with her friend and fellow chef, Dave Danhi, this past year. Danhi first had the inspiration for the truck after witnessing the popularity of the 2009 Grilled Cheese Invitational, a cook-off in L.A. that drew some 5,400 attendees that year. The throngs showed Danhi that he wasn't alone in his grilled cheese obsession, and he soon invited Grant to partner with him on the truck.

They wanted to create a menu that showcased the simple grilled cheese people came to know—and love—in childhood. But they also didn't want to completely abandon their high-end training. So they hired an artisanal baker to make the bread—but asked that baker to use pullman loaf pans. With more than 18,000 followers on Twitter, this chef team has clearly touched a nerve. What they didn't expect was the camaraderie that they've witnessed among their patrons. Grant tells the story of one customer who was visiting from Florida and needed a ride to Union Station. Some people she'd just met in line gave her a lift. "For me," says Grant, "that's what it's all about."

### TRY IT

- **PLAIN AND SIMPLE MELT:** french or wheat bread and a choice of four cheeses
- **CHEESY MAC AND RIB:** mac 'n' cheese—and optional barbecue pork and caramelized onions—mashed inside a grilled cheese sandwich
- **BRIE MELT:** with sliced pears and honey on cranberry-walnut bread

## SOUTH OF L.A.

If you live south of L.A., you still have some options when it comes to food trucks.

Orange County has somewhere between 10 and 20 trucks roaming the streets as of press time, including favorites **Kogi BBQ** ([kogibbq.com](http://kogibbq.com)) and **Louks** (gourmet Greek food; [loukstogo.com](http://loukstogo.com)). Search within Orange County on the website [roaminghunger.com](http://roaminghunger.com) to find trucks in your neighborhood.

**Kal Bi Q** ([kalbiq.com](http://kalbiq.com); [twitter.com/kalbiq](https://twitter.com/kalbiq)) and **Tab** ([tabebbq.com](http://tabebbq.com); [twitter.com/tabebbq](https://twitter.com/tabebbq)) are two of a handful of food trucks circuiting the San Diego area as of press time.

Cheesy mac and rib with grilled onions

# PHAMISH

**FIND IT** phamish.com; twitter.com/eatphamish

**L**isa Le has been a restaurateur, a makeup artist, and an entrepreneur. But she has always had a passion for cooking. Ten months ago, she decided to open her Phamish truck, which sells Vietnamese food. All but one of the recipes are Le's own, culled from years of watching and learning from others in her native Vietnam and also here.

"I learned from neighbors and from my friends," Le says. "I went to restaurants and tasted everything, then went home and experimented."

Le's passion comes through when she speaks about food, but it's equally clear in her work ethic. The co-owner-chef has help on the truck from her nephew, Hai Tran, and her son Khai Lu is the general manager. Another son, Hac Le, is branding and online marketing director. Still, Le says, she works almost 24/7 because of the prep work involved. The fresh produce and fresh-baked baguettes that make her *bánh mì* some of the best in L.A. require daily stops at her food purveyors, and the *pho* takes 4–6 hours to cook. But Le isn't complaining. In fact, she seems joyful. "I'm happy when I'm cooking something, making something to feed the people," she says.

## TRY IT

- **GRILLED STEAK BÁNH MÌ** (a fresh baguette stuffed with hot marinated grilled steak and cool chopped veggies and herbs, including pickled carrots, daikon, cilantro, and jalapeño)
- **RARE STEAK PHO** (*pho tai*)
- **FRESH MINT LEMON SODA**



Lisa Le with fresh mint lemon soda

# FRYSMITH

**FIND IT** eatfrysmith.com; twitter.com/frysmith



Rajas fries

**B**asing an entire menu on french fries may seem a bit one-note to some, but not to Frysmith's Erik Cho. The self-confessed foodie grew up working in his mom's burger shops and has always loved fries. "Fries are delicious, and they're a blank slate," Cho says. "I wanted to do something no one else had done—fries with stuff on them."

To that end, Cho begins with Kennebec potatoes, thinly sliced and double-fried in canola oil for maximum crunch. (That oil is later recycled as fuel for the truck.) Then he adds toppings inspired by his roots. His *rajas* fries are smothered in poblano chiles, caramelized onions, *shawarma*-marinated steak, and jack cheese. A blend of Latino and Middle Eastern cuisines, the combo is a homage to the foods he ate growing up in Baldwin Park. Kimchi fries, meanwhile, were a more organic invention. "I'm Korean," says Cho, "so the kimchi thing is a natural for me. And kimchi with cheese is delicious."

## TRY IT

- **RAJAS FRIES**
- **CHILI CHEESE FRIES**
- **POUTINE:** a French-Canadian greasy-spoon staple consisting of fries smothered in brown gravy and cheese curds

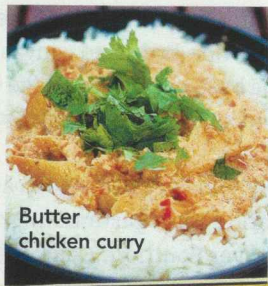
VANESSA STUMP (2)



Lamb frankie



Sumant Pardal



Butter chicken curry

## INDIA JONES CHOW TRUCK

**FIND IT** [indiajoneschowtruck.blogspot.com](http://indiajoneschowtruck.blogspot.com); [twitter.com/indiajonesct](https://twitter.com/indiajonesct)

When Sumant Pardal's restaurant closed in 2009, it didn't take him long to find another venture. "Some friends turned me on to the Kogi truck, and I read about it," he says. "Within 10 days, I was on the road with my truck."

That might sound fast, but restaurants are in Pardal's blood. His father opened his first eatery in Jaipur, India, in 1948, and Pardal worked in the business as soon as he was old enough. During his 27 years in Los Angeles, Pardal has owned 12 restaurants, including the popular East India Grill chain.

The India Jones Chow Truck is simply Pardal's latest culinary endeavor. The food is mostly North Indian regional fare, including a rotating list of four curries (butter chicken—a crowd favorite—always makes the cut), plus *paratha* (served with a particularly zingy and delicious *raita*), samosa spring rolls, and *frankies*.

The latter is a Mumbai street-food staple with cilantro, tamarind, chutney, chopped onion, egg, and an additional protein, such as lamb or chicken, all wrapped in roti flatbread. But Pardal emphasizes that the most important ingredient for success is less quantifiable. "There's always got to be the 'wow' factor in your food," he says. "You've got to be able to take one bite and go 'Wow, this is great.' Otherwise you're not going to be successful in the truck business." **W**

Keren Engelberg is a features editor for Westways.

### TRY IT

- LAMB FRANKIE
- BUTTER CHICKEN CURRY
- KEMMA (MINCED BEEF) PARATHA

## HOW TO FIND THE TRUCKS

### Go Where They Gather

There are certain areas where the trucks tend to congregate. These include:

#### LUNCH

- **Downtown:** near USC
- **Westwood:** near UCLA
- **Midtown:** Wilshire Boulevard/Miracle Mile, between Fairfax Avenue and Hauser Boulevard
- **West L.A.:** near the intersection of Tennessee and Butler avenues
- **Santa Monica:** Pennsylvania Avenue, east of 26th Street
- **Torrance:** Toyota, Honda, and BMW headquarters

#### DINNER/LATE NIGHT

- **Venice:** The Brig/Abbot Kinney Boulevard
- **Silver Lake:** Sunset Junction area, near Intelligentsia coffeehouse
- **Downtown:** Art Walk, on Main Street by Fourth Street

### Follow Them on Twitter

Using Twitter is easy.

**Step 1:** Go to [twitter.com](https://twitter.com) and sign up. (It'll only take a minute or two, and it's free.)

**Step 2:** Click on "Find People" in the top menu bar, and type in the name of the truck you'd like to follow.

**Step 3:** Click on the "Follow" icon. (You can also opt to have tweets from a particular truck sent to your mobile phone.)

**Step 4:** Log in to Twitter any time to view real-time tweets from the trucks you're following, or just check your phone for texts from your favorite trucks if you've chosen that option.

### Check out These Aggregators

These websites compile tweets from just about all of the food trucks:

- [roaminghunger.com](http://roaminghunger.com)
- [findlafoodtrucks.com](http://findlafoodtrucks.com)

This site also maps them for you:

- [la.truxmap.com](http://la.truxmap.com)

And then there's this iPhone app, which is a GPS-enabled food truck finder:

- **Road Stoves GPS** ([app.roadstoves.com](http://app.roadstoves.com))