Catering trucks and street food don’t have the best reputations. In the past, you could count on food trucks to serve up suspect tuna salad on stale white bread with limp lettuce and coffee so strong it could strip the paint off your car. Today’s trucks, however, take a much different approach.

Street Food Gets Social

The “food truck” invasion is taking over America’s street corners from LA to NYC and Portland to Austin. Once the haunt of blue collar workers, food trucks now attract generation Y technocrats who track elusive food truck locations via Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter. Rumor has it that tracking via GPS will be available all too soon.

Alice Shin, Kogi BBQ food truck creative director and blogger reports, “I Twittered...and within two minutes it was kind of like Night of the Living Dead when you see zombies. I saw all of these people walking out of buildings toward the truck, and they were all looking at their phones and BlackBerrys...it was sort of both cool and creepy.”

Treats on Trucks

There are no limits to the types of food that are now being sold from trucks and carts--a million chicken dishes; Korean BBQ tacos; Indian curries; sushi; waffles; cupcakes; rice balls; regular, gourmet, eco-friendly, or Black Angus, grass-fed, organic burgers; vegan-friendly fare; ice cream treats and desserts of every type and delicious design; and soon, frog legs courtesy of SF’s Chez Spencer.

And no surprise here, along with local foodie entrepreneurs, corporate giants like Taco Bell, Duncan Donuts, and Baja Fresh are riding the gravy train--or truck, in this case. Even the chefs from Too Hot Tamales have hit the road with their Border Grill Truck.

Starting a Food Truck Business

Why start a food truck or cart rather than open a restaurant? The two prime reasons--start up costs, which can be considerably less (generally 10s rather than 100s of thousands for a truck), and profit margins, which can be considerably more (estimates run 50 percent for food trucks versus 10 percent for restaurants). In his August Wall Street Journal article, Raymund Flandez offers the following steps to start a food truck business:

1. **Buy a used truck cheap.** Choices include buying a used truck and retrofitting it, buying a new truck, or leasing. Given that a new truck can cost between $100,000 and $120,000, it’s probably not the most attractive option. Smaller, portable food carts may be suitable (and cheaper) for certain types of foods.

2. **Find a good location.** Easier said than done! If food truckers don’t have access to private property, they are often held hostage by state and local rules, regulations, and ordinances about where they can park, and for how long--if they can get a vendor permit or license in the first place.

3. **Use social networking technology.** Probably the easiest of the three steps given how quickly a food trucker can obtain and update a Facebook, Myspace, or Twitter page. It’s entirely possible that part of the attraction for the technologically savvy “bougie” crowd is the phenomenon of being “in the know” when others are clueless.
Before you say “sign me up,” there are some additional things Flandez didn’t cover. There are regulations that govern truck storage, insurance, and security. And what about all-important permits and licenses? NYC, for example, has offered, by lottery, only 3,100 food vendor licenses each year since 1979, with priority given to existing vendors. With a waiting list of 10-15 years, there’s a thriving black market, with vendor permits selling for anywhere from $5,000 to $20,000. Plus, what’s the story with seniority (for example, respecting the space of the guy who’s been selling tacos there since 1982), and is proximity to angry restaurateurs going to cause problems? All of these things need to be taken into consideration before chefs with street food aspirations take the plunge.

Time will certainly tell whether food trucks are fad, trend, craze, or new fixtures in the Americana dining landscape.

11-12 Grade Band Informative/Explanatory Writing Task

In the passage, the author describes in detail the emerging food truck scene and gives a list of best practices for those looking to start their own food truck. Write an essay that uses the information contained in the article to explain what it takes to be a popular and successful food truck entrepreneur. Your essay should use detailed evidence from the text and make inferences based on the passage as support for your explanation.