

Siuslaw News

Community Voices



FOOD TRUCK FANCY

Florence-area food trucks look to a flavor-filled future

The ‘Big Bad Brian’ is layers of slow smoked, juicy, mouth-watering beef brisket with just a little bit of the fat still left on it so you get that nice, luscious bite,” said Sammi Lewis of Craig’s BBQ’s signature sandwich. “And the smoked bacon that’s crispy, but not too crispy, so that it crackles in your mouth. And then the pulled pork. Oh my goodness...”

Lewis is also a fantasy writer, so that passionate description went on for another five minutes.

She knows how to sell a sandwich through words, but she also wants to sell Florence on the idea of food trucks.

On Saturday, July 8, the “Food Trucks for a Cure” event was held in the Three Rivers Casino Resort parking lot where Lewis, along with her business partner Craig Hogan, served the “Big Bad” from their food truck.

The event was envisioned as a food truck festival, showing off eight to 10 food trucks from Florence and the surrounding areas, all in support of Relay for Life, coming July 22 to the Florence Events Center.

That was the vision, at least. “We brought in four food vendors,” said Three Rivers Promotions Coordinator Andy Tidball.

They were expecting more. The reasons for the small turnout were varied. Some out of town vendors had plumbing troubles; others had just entered the Great Umpqua Food Truck Competition the week earlier; and there was the Oregon Country Fair occurring at the same time just 45 minutes away in Veneta, which featured a multitude of food trucks. “This was a really bad date,” Tidball admitted.

But hope was not lost. Tidball figured 500 people showed up to the event, an encouraging number, considering all the factors.

And the money raised for Relay for Life was significant.

Ten percent of proceeds went to the organization, and the casino matched all donations that the vendors gave. All told, the event raised \$1,040.

“We will be doing this again next year. Everyone had a great time and we raised over \$1,000. We are really pleased about that. Now, we are looking forward to next year and making it bigger and bigger,” said Rich Colton, director of consumer marketing at the casino.

For the vendors who participated in the event, they felt it proved something they had known for a long time: Florence needs food trucks.

Hogan envisions a future where food trucks become a driving force in Florence’s economy.

“In Portland, and even now in Eugene, they’re a draw for people,” he said. “It’s a destination to bring people into town.”

Lewis agreed.

“Florence is more than just C&M Stables, Old Town, Sand Master Park and the antiques district,” she said. “There’s lots of stuff in Florence and we need people to stay a little longer.”

The hope is to get a place in Florence where multiple food trucks would permanently gather, or a “pod” — six to 10 trucks that would serve a cornucopia of various culinary tastes, ranging from gourmet burgers and bold bbq sauces to exotic foods from across the world.

And unlike brick and mortar restaurants, vendor competition in this setting would be a benefit.

“I think having multiple trucks all together would be more collaborative than competitive,” said Stephanie Crosthwaite, co-owner of Oregon BoxLunch, a food truck that sits outside City Lights Cinemas on Highway 101. “We would all work together and have menus that complimented each other, instead of a bunch that had burgers.”

The food truck craze began a number of years ago with TV shows like Food Truck Face Off and The Great Food Truck Race. What began as a fad has turned into a viable opportunity for chefs to show off their culinary mastery with less risk.

An oft-stated myth says that 90 percent of restaurants fail within the first year. However, according to a 2014 analysis of 81,000 eateries over a 20-year period, only 17 percent of the standard brick and mortar establishments failed within its first year. The actual median lifespan is 4.5 years.

These high survival rates are for larger businesses like a Red Lobster, however. Smaller, independent companies last an average of 3.75 years.

Cost is usually the biggest factor in restaurant failure. The average startup cost is \$275,000, and that is just upfront. With razor thin profit margins, insurance and salary concerns, survival is difficult.

Food trucks, on the other hand, cost half that to begin, according to Food Truck Empire. Instead of an entire staff of waiters, front of house managers, dishwashers and cooks, a food truck only needs a few dedicated people.

So chefs are ditching the stores and hitting the road.

Craig’s BBQ knows this first hand. It originally started as a food truck business. Hogan had a friend randomly gave him a smoker, which he used as an opportunity to try out some fun



PHOTOS BY JARED ANDERSON/SIUSLAW NEWS
(Right) Craig Hogan, of Craig’s BBQ food truck, smokes ingredients for his signature “Big Bad Brian” sandwich at Three Rivers Casino Resort’s “Food Trucks for a Cure” July 8. Local food trucks gathered to provide a taste of the future while raising money for Florence Relay for Life.



recipes. Soon, he was winning competitions, and the accolades led to a following. His food truck was born.

It seemed only logical that they get a permanent business, so he opened Craig’s BBQ on Highway 101. But the profits were narrow and, in his mind, it just felt like work.

“We were always in the kitchen, we didn’t talk to anyone,” Lewis said.

When the lease on the building ran out and the original owners wanted to reopen their own business, getting back on the road was an easy decision for Craig’s BBQ.

“We get to talk to people face to face, which makes it so nice,” Lewis said.

It’s that personal touch that the Crosthwaites really enjoy.

“We also have the face to face with customers,” Wayne said. “There’s stuff lost in translation when you’re dealing with a server. Here, we find out exactly what you want and like. There’s definitely more of a personal attachment to the customers.”

Stephanie, Wayne’s wife and cooking partner, agreed.

“We have customers that, when we see people pull up, we know exactly what they want and exactly how they like it. I like that. Seeing the customers, we become friends with them over time,” she said.

Chefs generally don’t get to interact with their customers, hidden in the back of the house in sweltering kitchens.

One of the reasons the Crosthwaites

love cooking is seeing people’s faces when they try their food: the smiles, and the camaraderie that a well-made meal can create.

For them, food isn’t just sustenance. It’s a connection with those around them — a sense of community.

That immediate connection between cook and culinary connoisseur is what the food truck owners want to make an experience in Florence.

While these establishments have a good connection with local customers, getting the word out to tourists can be challenging. Scattered about in disparate parking lots hidden from view, a pod wouldn’t just be a tourist destination, but would help in the food trucks’ survival.

So the Florence trucks are beginning to organize.

“I know there’s a Las Vegas company that bought the property in front of the Old School Furniture where I originally had my food truck,” said Hogan. “We’re trying to talk with them to see if they would be interested to have us park there. They could put power in so there isn’t the noise of all the generators. Easy parking, easy in and out. And that would draw more businesses up the highway.”

Currently, A Taste of Hawaii is the only truck residing in the parking lot. Owned by chef Christian Jakobsen and his wife Natasha, the truck offers authentic Hawaiian-Asian fusion delicacies, including Spam Musubi.

Tidball sees the casino getting into the game as well. He said he hopes that the casino could have a yearly food truck festival — on a better date of course.

“In a perfect world, next year I would have 15 food trucks and 1,000 people. I think we can pull that off,” he said.

Hogan would like to see this turn into a full-blown head to head competition with the trucks.

“I told them we should do a ‘Chopped’ competition,” he said. “They bring out ingredients and (the different food trucks) have to make something out of it.”

And the competitors? A gaggle of Florence food trucks taking a small break from their successful community pod, going head to head with Oregon’s most acclaimed food trucks.

Until that happens, Lewis continued her description of the “Big Bad Brian.”

“And then its all topped with a toasted bun. Oh my goodness, you get the crunch, you get the sweetness and you get the spicy. You get all those luscious flavors together. It’s like heaven on a bun,” she said.

Craig’s BBQ is located at the corner of Highway 101 and Maple Street in front of Pro-Lumber.

BoxLunch is located at 1930 Highway 101 in front of City Lights Cinemas.

A Taste of Hawaii is located at 1499 Rhododendron Drive in front of Old School Furniture.



(Left) Wayne Crosthwaite with Oregon BoxLunch enjoys the personal interaction he gets with customers while operating the food truck near City Lights Cinemas. (Above) From sandwiches to sushi, food trucks feature a variety of locally-made dishes and fresh ingredients. (Right) Three Rivers Casino Resort’s “Food Trucks for a Cure” raises \$1,000 for the upcoming Florence Relay for Life on July 22.

