

Operators drive business with gourmet trailers

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These entrepreneurs are finding their mobile restaurants in a variety of locations, even from eBay or Craigslist, where they can be purchased for as little as \$5,000.

Such a Craigslist find became Holy Cacao, which shares lot space with Izzoo Tacos.

"We're in an old taco trailer that we found on Craigslist," said John Spillyards, co-owner of Holy Cacao. "We completely renovated it, down to the granite countertops."

Spillyards, who is in the machinery business, opened Holy Cacao in March with his partner, Ellen Kinsey, who has a master's degree from the Wharton School of Business.

"We could have gone the brick-and-mortar direction, but for significantly less overhead we were able to open this," Spillyards said. To reflect their Austin style, they hired local artist Claire Hughes to paint murals on the trailer.

Holy Cacao offers gourmet hot chocolates, frozen drinks and "cake balls," which are cold, chocolate-

dipped cakes on a stick for \$1.50.

"We thought we would sell a couple hundred cake balls a day and a few chocolates and milkshakes," said Spillyards. "We have gone from 200 cake balls a day to 500 and then to over 1,000. The response has blown us away."

For culinary expertise, they hired as executive chef Mary Margaret Higdon, a Culinary Institute of America graduate. They also rely on advice from Spillyards' sister, Cammie Spillyards, who is director of culinary innovation at the Chili's Grill & Bar chain.

"We're always looking at new menu items," Kinsey said.

Spillyards said the recession makes gourmet trailers a popular alternative not only among investors but consumers as well.

"In a day when economic times are tight, a consumer may not be able to go have a \$9 piece of pie at a restaurant," he said. "But for a buck and a half, I can have a really nice luxury dessert. People still want those luxuries, but this is a

way it can be delivered at a significantly lower cost."

Just a few blocks away on Austin's South Congress Avenue is an entire block front of gourmet trailers, offering six diverse menus ranging from popcorn to Austin's popular Hey, Cupcake!

The Mighty Cone opened there in March and touts its familial relationship to the esteemed Hudson's on the Bend fine-dining restaurant. Mighty Cone is a creation of Hudson's owner Jeff Blank and executive chef Robert Rhoades. The trailer offers chicken and shrimp "meat cones" as well as sliders, giving customers a chance to sample Hudson's fare for less than \$10 a sitting.

The popularity of Austin's trailers is gaining the attention of established multiunit operators.

Jeff Sinelli, founder and chief executive of the Dallas-based Which Wich sandwich chain, said a franchisee in College Station, Texas, is investigating creating a satellite trailer location because of the seasonality of university business.



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Hey, Cupcake! is among six gourmet-food trailers on one block in Austin, Texas.

"We can use the original store as a commissary and set up the trailer as a mobile outpost with the ability to move it to special events," Sinelli said. "We attach it to the actual physical store. As a franchisor, we love it because it grows our sales."

"We're still costing it out, but the cost is a quarter of a what a brick-and-mortar restaurant will cost," he said. Currently, he said he projects a brand-new trailer, such as a Wells Cargo, outfitted for foodservice, to be \$100,000, give or take \$25,000.

"Anytime you reduce your footprint, you can reduce your labor," Sinelli said. "You can capitalize on large events with their high sales. If

a location doesn't work, you have the mobility to move it across the street, so to speak. And fun is an advantage: It's hip; it's fun. Customers feel they are supporting the 'little guy.'"

Sinelli said the gourmet trailers fit in what he Austin, which has what he calls an "artsy-entrepreneur feel. The Airstream works well for that. There's a slogan there of 'Keep Austin Weird,' and that works."

Denney said those looking at gourmet trailer foodservice should consider a number of factors that might impact operations. Among them are dealing with inclement weather, accommodating some seating, ensuring foot traffic, learning how to run an efficient kitchen in such a small space without harming quality, obtaining adequate utilities, and creating a sense of permanence despite the restaurant's mobility. ■

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