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JUNE/JULY/AUG 2012 CONTENTS

Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party by Michael Szalay

Escape from Camp 14 by Blaine Harden

The Outsourced Self: Intimate Life in Market Times by Arlie Russell Hochschild

Sam Lipsyte, Elif Batuman, Mary Gaitskill, and Mike Albo on The Money Plot

Melanie Rehak on food-truck recipes

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Apr/May 2018
Feb/Mar 2018
Dec/Jan 2018
Sept/Oct/Nov 2017
June/July/Aug 2017
Apr/May 2017
Feb/Mar 2017
more past issues

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JUNE/JULY/AUG 2012

Trucking Out

MELANIE REHAK

It all began with the Los Angeles kimchi taco truck. Rumors of this previously unimaginable and yet obviously brilliant invention began to float into our Brooklyn home from the West Coast sometime in 2009. My husband, a native Angeleno—and thus a taco snob—as well as a kimchi fanatic, immediately began trying to find a reason to fly out to the City of Angels as soon as possible. Surely there was a conference, a wedding, some critical gathering that would put him in close proximity to this ideal mash-up of two of his favorite food groups (unlike me and no doubt many other people, he counts pickled cabbage as a vital, life-giving category unto itself). After all, that's the thing about—even the point of—street food: It may come to your neighborhood, but it doesn't come to you. You go to it.

It is, as the ever-intrepid and intelligent John T. Edge writes in his new book, *The Truck Food Cookbook: 150 Recipes and Ramblings from America's Best Restaurants on Wheels* (Workman, $19), "by its very nature, ephemeral." He warns that "by the time you hold this book in your hands"—and you can imagine him shaking a finger still smudged with the tantalizing remains of a meal from his latest mobile-kitchen discovery as he does it—"a number of these vendors will have closed. Others will have moved." So hurry up, even if it means paying full price for a cross-country jaunt on JetBlue to get that certain burrito you won't find anywhere else.

As it turned out, Kogi, the truck that was the object of my husband's obsession, was in no danger of disappearing. Run by a chef who trained at the Culinary Institute of America, had worked at Le Bernardin, and, as Edge notes, "gives good quotes," it's since morphed into a fleet of trucks that keep LA in *kalbi* at all hours of the day and night, with a sit-down restaurant to match. It has also given rise to imitators galore, with names like Kung Fu Taco, Calbi, Don Chow Tacos, and Bool BBQ. New York got its own version in 2010, with the pleasingly straightforward name Kimchi Taco Truck. Now, instead of facing a run-in with TSA screeners who would demand he throw out his personal bottle of sriracha sauce before boarding, my other half need journey only as far as SoHo or midtown Manhattan to get his fix. What's more, he can find out ahead of time in a multitude of ways—websites, apps, Twitter feeds, and more—where Kimchi Taco is squatting for the day.

Not that that's the only way to find a truck, of course. The old-fashioned method—wandering the streets in search of lunch and making a lucky find—still works, too. Part of the joy of dining alfresco from a cart or a truck or a stand is the pure serendipity of coming across it by accident. But even now, when you can search out everything from lobster rolls to waffles to jerk chicken and cheesesteaks ahead of time, and when food-truck meet-ups and festivals are becoming a regular fixture in the national food landscape (and local governments struggle with ways to adjust permits and zoning for them), the fun is as much in the spectacle as it is in the food. What will the specials be? Who else will be in line? Will it rain while you're waiting for your schnitzel? (And how the hell do they make schnitzel in a truck, anyway? To which I should add: Will there be a grease fire?) One of my own personal recurring inquiries is whether New York City's (and my) beloved Big Gay Ice Cream Truck will be parked by Union Square, where it's convenient for me to stop off for a cone after a nearby meeting, or whether it will be too far away for me to indulge efficiently in one of their signature Choinkwich sandwiches, or perhaps a curry-ginger shake.

The Big Gay Ice Cream Truck first came into my life on a sweaty afternoon in the spring of 2010 when its campy rainbow soft-serve-cone logo caught my eye as I was heading for the subway entrance. But it actually rolled out into the streets as part of a wave of food trucks

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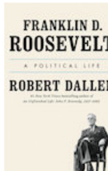

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LECTURES
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that began sweeping the nation's cities around 2009. These were not the carts and trucks of times gone by—basic, practical pit stops for blue-collar workers on their lunch and coffee breaks. Instead, they contained great ambition within their cramped quarters. What Edge encountered as he traveled the US for a year doing research for *The Truck Food Cookbook* was an "insurgent band of young cooks who now stand at the helm of stepside vans, retrofitted Airstreams, and reimagined fiberglass carts, griddling grass-fed beef and tucking burgers inside focaccia buns. . . . Their work is informed . . . by the farm-to-fork movement, classical culinary matriculation, hard knocks education, punk rock gestalt, and a universal impatience." The owners usually employ a great deal of media savvy in getting the word out in a way unknown, indeed unneeded, by the "other" kind of food trucks. So it was one evening that after enjoying a vanilla soft-serve coated with wasabi-pea dust, one of the Big Gay Ice Cream Truck's most ineffable and delicious creations, I sat down at my laptop and discovered that the vendor's online presence was as robust as its wacky combinations of toppings.

Doug Quint and Bryan Petroff, who run the truck, were not, unlike many of their counterparts, trained chefs with extensive fine-dining résumés before they started their business (take heart, underemployed bassoon players—Quint was once among your ranks, and there is a future for you in the frozen-dessert world!). But they have in common with their many mobile compatriots the fact that even as they make genuine connections with their customers based on shared culinary obsessions, they are engaged as much in marketing as in cooking.

Almost every food truck these days sells merchandise, if only T-shirts, and many of them have spawned restaurants. (Quint and Petroff opened the Big Gay Ice Cream Shop in the East Village last summer, and dropped the *Truck* from their official name to, as they say on their website, "encompass all of [the company's] ventures.") Their proprietors are aware of their public presence in a way that the guy who runs an anonymous cheesesteak cart in West Philadelphia, or one of Manhattan's tiny coffee and buttered-roll carts, undoubtedly is not. Josh Henderson, chef and owner of Seattle's Skillet truck, which hit the streets in 2007 and is featured in *The Truck Food Cookbook* (as is Big Gay Ice Cream), says he was relieved to find a business partner who could handle the finances of his business because "it let me stay hyperfocused on the food and on the brand." He, too, has a restaurant, the Skillet Diner, and now, to go with it, *The Skillet Cookbook: A Street Food Manifesto* (Sasquatch Books, $19).

I'm the last person in the world to complain about the new and abundant availability of cupcakes, artisanal grilled cheese, and all kinds of other deliciousness without table service. I like all of it as much as I like the cheap Salvadoran *pupusas* I buy from a silver cart next to the fields and swimming pool where my kids like to go in the summer, and the nameless street meat that has always been a feature of Manhattan vendors. That I can wear a tank top emblazoned with the logo of my favorite trendy truck, or order Henderson's famed bacon jam online, is just a fringe benefit. But reading Edge's book, which includes essays on the food-cart scene in more than a dozen cities, from gourmet groupings in Portland, Oregon, and Austin, Texas, to the workaday quilted-metal sandwich carts of Philadelphia, and the many, many taco trucks of Houston—"They are not faddish. They are not fey. And they matter"—is a lesson in remembering what food can be, even in its humblest iterations. "Much of the street food I document here is outsider food, immigrant food, the food of the underclass," Edge writes. "Accept this sort of street food on its own terms and it serves as an entrée to people and place, a passkey to understanding customs and mores." Even Henderson, whose book is as much about him and his vision as it is about food (and not always in a good way), acknowledges that "street food is about community . . . about spreading a story through putting food in the hands of people."

All of which raises the question: Do we really need recipes for street food? If one of its unique qualities is to allow us to engage with other people, other cultures, and other cuisines, as prepared by those who know them best, how is making the tacos or rice curry omelets or doughnuts at home, in the entirely planned environment of your own kitchen, worthwhile? There's no serendipity in it at all, and very little to discover other than that, yes, you can re-create the Thai Chicken Karaage from the East Side King truck in Austin in the comfort of your own home—but then you have to eat it there, too. There's something almost perverse about extolling the pleasures and value of street food, which is in many ways the closest thing we have to indigenous cuisine in this country, and then making it possible to remove it from the context from which it gathers a great deal of its meaning. Still, I'm hanging on to *The Truck Food Cookbook*. I may never use the recipes, but it has the makings of an excellent travel guide. There are worse things than culinary wanderlust to set your compass by, and very few better ones at that.