

NOLA Food Truck Podcast

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HOST INTRO:

Green and red sauces drizzle over spicy pork gorditas and beef tacos. A crowd of young college students clusters around Rubens Taco Truck to satisfy their cravings. Rubens is a Brazilian street food vendor, a businessman creating economic opportunity through inexpensive eats. But Rubens, like most street vendors in New Orleans, faces legislative obstacles hindering opportunity. What are these obstacles to the street vending community? What is the position of both sides of this fight? Axel Lloyd, Daniel Thunell, and Gabriella Cerqueira dig into spicy the issue.

AMBI/ Palms

TRACK 1:

Night has fallen over New Orleans. The air is thick. New Orleans is waking up. A crowd of young Tulane students gathers outside the Palms Bar and Grill, a mere two blocks from the school's library, and we get in line. But not to get inside. We all have something else on our minds. Walking towards the Palms you immediately see a truck, a vibrantly painted octopus rapping around the sides. Savory wafts of herbs, roasted vegetables and grilled meats emanate from the truck. Inside, Rubens Leite, a Brazilian immigrant, cooks up late-night food for these hungry twenty-somethings. Tulane students not only enjoy his food but his jovial personality, smiling and making jokes as he takes many orders. It is easy to see why he is so adored by the Tulane community. We approach the front of the line and decide to dig into a greasy gordita and two orders of tacos. Muito delicioso.

AMBI/Capoeira music

ACT/Gabriella:

Tudo bem? (How is everything?)

ACT/Ruben

Tudo bem! (Everything is good)

TRACK 2:

Rubens is the only visible mobile food vendor within the Tulane Community, parking his truck outside the doors of The Palms most nights. He is originally from Sao Paulo, a vibrant state full of culture and flavor much like Louisiana. He came to the USA in 1995, moving to New York. But why is he making tacos?

ACT/RUBEN

Porque sempre gosta de "fast food." Eu acho que é mais simples e pratico, e rápido então a comida brasileiro é muito cara, e difícil para preparar; já comida e não muita rápida. Tacos é simples e barato. (Because everyone loves fast food. I think tacos are simple, practical and fast.

Brazilian food is difficult and expensive; this food is not very fast. Tacos are simple and cheap.)

AMBI/sizzling food

TRACK 3: Rubens migrated to New Orleans from New York in 2006. Rubens explains New Orleans laws are

ACT/RUBEN

Não progressivo. Por exemplo, aqui apenas cem permites para pessoas para trabalhar (na rua). É muito difícil. (Non-progressive. For example, here only a hundred people are allowed to work [on the street]. It is very difficult.)

TRACK 4: What Rubens' is referring to are old laws that limit the number of licenses for mobile vendors in the city. Many other vendors, frustrated by the antiquated laws, have come together hoping to spark a progressive movement within the burgeoning industry. We meet with Andrew Legrand, an attorney for the New Orleans Food Truck Coalition, on a beautiful spring day outside the Superdome. The organization is holding an event to raise the awareness of food trucks in the city, and many popular trucks have shifted their gears into park and sparked their grills, La Cocinita, Taceaux Loceaux and Empanada Intifada are open for business. Legrand explains the importance of the coalition.

ACT/ANDREW

Gaining access to more areas of the CBD... Right now it is currently a restricted area... There is also a 600-foot proximity restriction to restaurants so no food truck can be within 600 feet of a restaurant... And the third there is only 100 permits available, not just for food trucks but for all mobile food vendors. So in the city we have fresh fruit vendors, fresh fruit and vegetable vendors that sit on street corners, they take up a permit, we have Lucky Dogs in the French Quarter they take up a permit, we have guys that drive around in ice cream trucks, they take up a permit. So all these mobile food vendors together can have a total of 100 permits. All these laws, the permit restriction, the geographical restriction of the CBD and the 600-foot restriction is all from 1956. Our goal is to make it less restrictive on food trucks and to make it easier for everyone to understand.

TRACK 5: We make our way over to the Empanada Intifada truck, highlighted in strokes of bright yellows and blues. Here we meet Taylor Jackson, owner and operator of the truck. He echoes the statements of Andrew, but he is more critical and doesn't shy away from opening up.

ACT/TAYLOR

It took us a year and a half to get a license. And since we've gotten a license, we've been hassled by a policeman at least once a month ever since we've been in operation. Effectively, under the current regulations, almost all of New Orleans is off limits to food trucks. There's a 45-minute rule, which keeps you from serving in the same place for more than 45 minutes. Which is usually about how long it takes to setup and start serving. Effectively New Orleans has decided that food trucks are illegal without saying it that clearly.

TRACK 6: Seems harsh right? Especially in a city whose culinary tradition is so renowned and

appreciated. Why would the city want to limit the dining choices to tourists?

ACT/TAYLOR

Well when you talk about the tourist industry being a very important lobby in New Orleans, really what you're saying is that the restaurant industry is a really important lobby in New Orleans. There are over 1200 restaurants in New Orleans, each of them has employees that they can influence the vote of, a great deal of money to throw around, particularly through the Louisiana Restaurant Association.

TRACK 7: It's not all bad though. Taylor is optimistic, revealing that with the New Orleans Food Truck Coalition that talks with City Council have begun and that work is moving in the right direction. While no calls were immediately returned, members of the City Council have released statements on the issue. Previously, Danielle Viguerie, communications director for New Orleans City Council member Stacy Head, has spoken on the issue, saying "Head is a strong proponent for economic development, especially helping out small businesses. She sees food trucks as a great entrepreneurial opportunity for people who might not want to open a restaurant." Cynthia Hedge-Morrell, District D Councilmember, explains just why there has been so much resistance to the food truck industry in New Orleans. She suggests an inherent importance of brick and mortar restaurants compared to food trucks, revealing "I'm all for food trucks, but I don't want them to be in competition with people who struggled for years."

TRACK 18: Ms. Hedge-Morrell brings up a valid case. New Orleans is built on the food industry and many of the establishments open around this city were only opened through much blood, sweat and tears. The laws that protect restaurants are indeed old and convoluted but they have not been changed for a reason. Hurricane Katrina had an extreme impact on the culinary industry, wiping out many established restaurants. In the wake of the hurricane, the New Orleans Restaurant Renewal Fund was established to help financially support and restore damaged restaurants. Speaking at the James Beard Foundation Awards in May 2006, Charles Dunn, the NORRF president, explained his position. "It is critical for New Orleans and the culinary heritage of our country that the great restaurants of the city survive the volatile circumstances resulting from Katrina. The NORRF is working with a number of relatively small, renowned restaurants, which are essential to preserving the city's culinary traditions, in an effort to build a bridge to their stability." Back to Andrew Legrand, attorney for the New Orleans Food Truck Coalition, we mingle with food vendors take one last bite of tacos from Taceaux Loceaux and get down to business. Andrew details just why some decide to operate a mobile food truck rather than risk setting up a restaurant.

ACT/ANDREW

(Don't have the actual quote from Andrew accessible right now, but it starts at 7:20 in our recording and he explains the expenses of opening up a restaurant.)

TRACK 9: This is where hesitation comes in supporting new legislation for mobile food vendors. The people of New Orleans are suspicious of outside forces, worrying that the great culture and history of this city could be lost. And many do not see food trucks as part of the culinary culture and industry in New Orleans, preferring to stick with the restaurants that have been a staple in this city for years. Rubens says mobile food vendors are stuck at a red light.

Restaurant owners will tell you that they are concerned with the safety and health standards of mobile food trucks, a belief supported by the City Council. Rachel Billow, founder of La Cocinata and the New Orleans Food Truck Coalition, steps out of her lively red truck and tells us about the steps she has taken to get fully licensed.

ACT/RACHEL

(Once again I don't have a copy of the recording with me but at 2:50 of our interview with her she details how hard it was to get health and fire inspections. But that these validate her truck as healthy and safe.)

TRACK 10:

We go back to Rubens Leite serving up food at the Palms and see if he plans on going back to Brazil or staying in New Orleans to fight the laws and get food trucks legal.

TRACK 10: Time will tell if New Orleans opens her door to the food truck culture like it has so kindly accepted Rubens and his tacos. Another City Council hearing is set for later this month to decide on updating the laws and making the restrictions on food trucks less harsh. Whatever the decision, all New Orleanians can agree that if somebody is cooking up some good food with a good attitude, it does not matter whether their kitchen is in the back of a restaurant or in the back of a truck. For WTUL, this is Gabriella Cerqueira, Dan Thunell and Axel Lloyd.