



TRIBEZA

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THE *Food* ISSUE

THE WAY WE EAT NOW.

WHAT'S THE FUTURE OF MEALS ON WHEELS?

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HAS THE FOOD TRUCK CRAZE RUN ITS COURSE, OR IS IT JUST RAMPING UP? TWO EXAMPLES—A NEWBIE AND A VETERAN—FACE OFF TO PREDICT THE FUTURE OF THE “TRAILERAUNT.”

Welcome to the revolution. Kyoten's Zen garden dining “room” is set with handmade wooden tables, low, flickering lamps, and a ceiling of stars in a twilight sky. The food is astonishingly good—cured, marinated, and pressed Japanese mackerel sushi topped with a thin film of kombu, silky handmade tofu in a sweet soy dashi, butter mochi with balsamic cherries and vanilla-kirsch cream. It's almost impossible to imagine that Otto Phan's concept is a direct descendant of the question-

able tacos sold from the back of a truck at the construction site mere blocks away, but in the past five years, Austin has indeed been witness to an uprising the likes of which our culinary community hasn't seen since the 1841 Pig War at the French Legation. From the humble and practical beginnings of our mobile food scene, we've eaten French crepes and corpulent doughnuts from Airstream trailers; Indian dosas and cream-filled cupcakes on South Congress; meticulously sourced farm-



ALMOST FOUR YEARS AFTER OPENING HIS FIRST FOOD TRUCK, THE PEACHED TORTILLA FOUNDER ERIC SILVERSTEIN STANDS IN THE SPACE THAT WILL BE THE PEACHED TORTILLA'S BRICK AND MORTAR RESTAURANT.

manent, stylish “traileraunt” built in a shipping container), and I thought, “That’s it!” Leo was over here on East Sixth looking at a possible location behind a bar and discovered this lot. We called the owner, who happens to be as picky as we are, and struck a deal. Our third partner is James Maiden—he has extensive construction experience. James and Leo built out everything you see on our lot with their own hands.

What’s next?

This is it. This concept isn’t a stepping-stone to a brick-and-mortar or some other business plan. It’s not about branding or menu development. We are going to stay here and develop this concept. As far as I’m concerned, we are only 50 percent of the way there, but it’s all going to happen right here, in this trailer.

I’m not building a scalable concept. Kyoten is not designed to live without us. I’m the only one who knows how to make rice. The process isn’t even written down. This is about quality and the best sushi in Austin. I didn’t leave Uchi to open the Torchy’s Tacos of sushi.

How do you deliver this menu from a trailer?

We use Ramen Tatsu-Ya’s commissary kitchen—we don’t need a six-burner stove or a 10-man kitchen for our menu. I can do incredible sushi anywhere. If I had a brick-and-mortar, I’d

be putting out the exact same menu. The only thing I’m missing is the ability to sell alcohol.

What can you do here that you couldn’t do in a brick-and-mortar?

From the very beginning, we’ve gotten consistent five-star Yelp ratings because I get to see everything. If anything is messed up, I see it and I can fix it. There’s an immediate connection to both food and service in this context.

Besides the Zen garden dining area, what’s different about Kyoten?

Chef-driven trailers are a rarity. Kyoten is totally ingredient-driven. We source the best fish, all of it sustainably harvested. There are lots of things we don’t offer because they are not sustainable—unagi and bluefin tuna, for example.

THE PEACHED TORTILLA

The Peached Tortilla serves “thought-out, modernized Asian food with a Southern twist.” The new brick-and-mortar, designed by Kevin Stewart and slated to open on north Burnet Road in the fall of this year, will fill a niche for affordable, hip dining options for families with a menu of rice bowls, small plates, and street-to-table fare.

Several concepts started out mobile and moved into wildly successful brick-and-mortar businesses. But lots of trucks and trailers don’t

make it. What makes the difference?

The “mobile food” business model is really challenging. It’s not a real business. The owner does everything—if you can’t afford to pay people, what kind of model is that? Because everyone with a few thousand bucks to fund their dream is jumping into the trailer business, and because permits for actual street vending in Austin are almost impossible to get and really expensive, demand for space is really high. The supply is limited, so rent is ridiculously expensive. The smarter the operators are, the better the deals are, but everybody thinks strategically. There are a lot of hungry operators out there, willing to take any deal thrown out to them.

Perception is very different from reality. Unfortunately, doing it right takes a tremendous amount of hard work and dedication. And you have to be smart. For the long haul, you can’t have a family, you can’t have a significant other, you can’t have much of a life outside the truck. That rules out a lot of people.

How has your business model changed since started?

We don’t actually do much mobile vending anymore. Most of our money comes from catering and special events. It’s hard to make a living with mobile vending because we’re

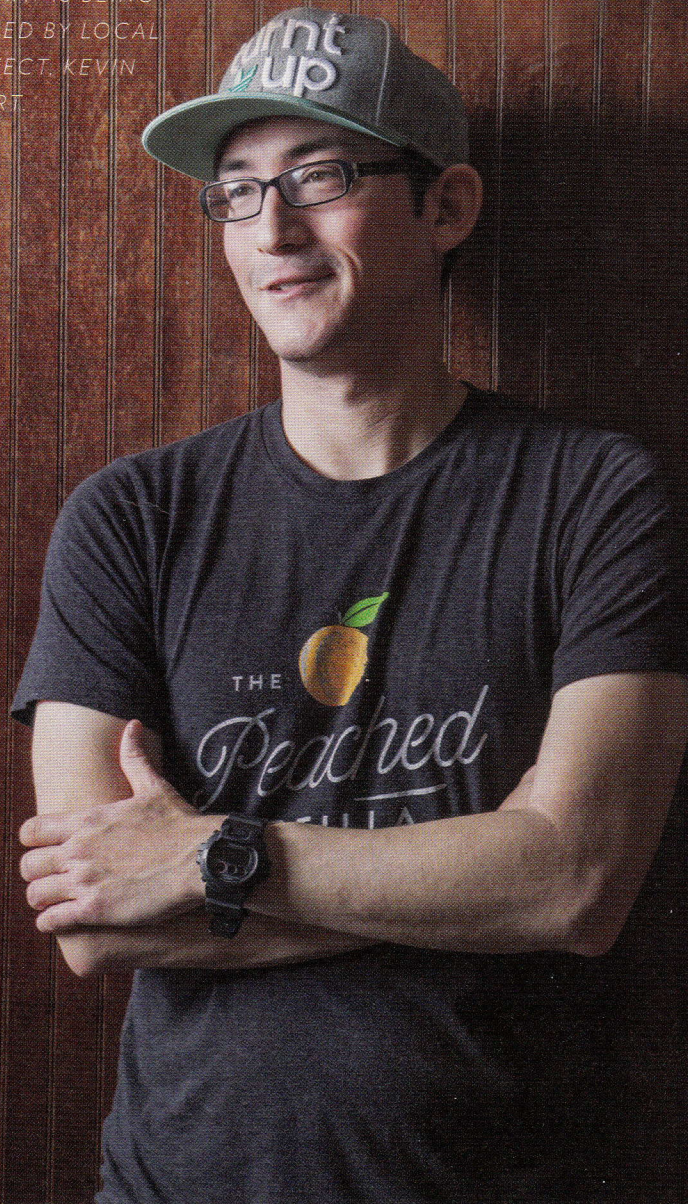


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THE
Peached
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ERIC POSING IN HIS NEW, UNDER CONSTRUCTION LOCATION THAT IS BEING DESIGNED BY LOCAL ARCHITECT, KEVIN STEWART.



able to collect on high-margin items like alcohol. After a year and a half of not paying myself, I had to get creative with this business model. We rebranded—I hired a high-end graphic designer and committed to doing way more than what we could do from the truck. We have put a lot of resources into catering sales.

I'll never get rid of the trucks, though. In fact, we might get another one soon. They will always be an important piece of our branding. People want trucks at their weddings and high-end events. As long as the mobile food scene stays hot, we will keep getting asked to special events where we can make money.

Do you see any big shifts coming in the near future?

No, not really. I think there will always be new people coming in. For most people, it's a dead end, but the barriers to entry are low, and hopes and dreams are powerful. If you could see your hopes and dreams realized for \$25,000, would you go for it?

What would you change about the past four years?

I don't think I'd do anything different. When I quit my job and moved to Austin, I was so high on myself and my idea I thought I'd be in a brick-and-mortar in 12 months. Well, here I am, 4 months in. I think as a community, it's made our culinary scene more creative, but I don't know that it's brought much in the way of quality to our community. **7**

The Peached Tortilla
at the Cedar
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ore the giant line
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of delicious-
Belgian, Bacon
and Sweet Po-
Manager Beto
serving another
y customer. The
brisket and
chy fish tacos
ways a hit.



THE PEACHED TORTILLA

