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Battle of the Streets: Food Cart Edition

The tantalizing smells of freshly fried churros permeate the air as the sizzling sound of meats on the grill enhance the appetizing atmosphere. The food carts and trucks dotting the city street corners create a tangible vibrancy that excites every sense. Over the years, the gastronomical experience has become an essential part of a city's identity. Due to the growing popularity of the "foodie culture," an increasing emphasis has been placed on marketing the food scene each city has to offer. Zooming in on the culinary mecca of the Midwest, Chicago features its famous deep-dish pizza and Chicago-style hot dogs along with a myriad of food from around the world. However, if you are looking to snag a Chicago-style dog off the street from a food cart, you better make sure the police are not around if you want to continue enjoying your favorite local cuisine. Although the medley of toppings adorning this hot dog may be considered criminal for being so good, the fact of the matter is that it is illegal to sell freshly prepared food from a cart in Chicago.

Chicago happens to be a very restrictive city when it comes to its food community - especially concerning street food vendors who own food carts. According to City Council, a mobile food vendor is defined as a "mobile food dispenser, mobile food preparer, produce merchant or mobile desserts vendor" (Chicago ch. 4-8, sec. 4-8-010). This only allows vendors to either sell previously prepared and packaged food or to serve food from a mobile food truck. Many people are aware of the booming food truck business which has

gained publicity through shows such as *Food Truck Wars* featured on Food Network. However, the food cart industry is struggling to gain recognition in the street food enterprise. The only allowance Chicago's City Council has for people using a "two-wheeled or three-wheeled motorized or non-motorized vehicle, pushcart, or handcart" is selling wrapped frozen desserts (ch. 4-8, sec. 4-8-010). Many people may not be aware of the strict limitations placed on these peddlers, but this stringent policy severely limits street vendors' creative expression in what they can sell.

In contrast, food trucks, which are bigger, more expensive, and often equipped with working kitchens and running water, had petitioned for a request to be able to prepare food in their trucks. After just two years, they succeeded in winning over the City Council and the Mobile Food Preparer license was added in 2012 which allows them to freshly prepare and serve food from their trucks (Eng). Street vendors, on the other hand, are still fighting this uphill battle. These food carts offer unique advantages and characteristics - not afforded by food trucks - that could open up new possibilities to improve the greater Chicago area. In this way, legalizing street food vending of prepared food would benefit not only the vendors themselves but the community as a whole - from the inadequate diets in local food deserts all the way to the adventurous palates of food connoisseurs.

Due to negative connotations that are sometimes related with street food, the food cart industry as a whole has not yet gained the same credibility associated with restaurants. In most restaurants, food is officially regulated in a building with a conventional kitchen, so the idea of food being prepared in an outdoor cart certainly merits cause to be wary. Some people are unsure as to where the food is coming from, how it is

being handled, or if it is even safe to eat. With the current situation, vendors who sell prepared food are working under the radar. This means their work stations and food conditions are not being monitored, so food safety is a legitimate concern. By legalizing the sale of freshly prepared food, the quality and safety of food would be better regulated, since vendors would then be held up to a legalized standard. Just like current mobile food dispensers and preparers, food cart vendors would be required to pass the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) and Chicago Food Department (CFD) inspections before a permit is issued (“Mobile Food” step 4). Then in order to ensure that protocol is being followed, “[l]ike any other restaurant or food establishment, after issuance of the license...[mobile food vendors would] be subject to routine sanitation inspections by [the] CDPH” (step 4). To further dispel worry about the safety of the food, just as it is done with all current food operators, vendors would be required to make their food at commissaries or regulated, shared kitchens around the city designated for the exclusive use of street food vendors. For the safety of everyone, food practices and conditions would therefore be controlled, and the situation of “underground” vendors would greatly improve, since they would no longer have to conduct their business in the shadows.

Many street food vendors currently work illegally either out of ignorance of the law or out of necessity to provide for themselves. Mexican immigrant and street food vendor Claudia, came to Chicago in order to live the “American Dream” and give her kids a better life. Through her street food cart, Claudia has sent a daughter to college, sold numerous tamales to factory and construction workers, and created new job opportunities for people. Her days begin and end in darkness because of the many hours she dedicates to her

business. However, because of Chicago's restrictions, her work has come at a price: she has often been harassed by the police and even arrested twice (Illinois Policy). Oftentimes, when immigrants come to America, they are stuck in jobs where they are exploited or mistreated because they have no other choice and they need the money. The majority of street food vendors are in fact immigrants which is seen in the large numbers of Latino street vendors coming to Chicago over the past 20 years (Martin 1875). By allowing street food vending, vendors could legally support their families without the constant fear of being harassed, fined or jailed, and more people could have the opportunity to escape low-quality, low-paying jobs by opting to open up a food cart.

Not only would doors open up for "underground" vendors, but aspiring vendors would finally be able to achieve their dreams of owning a cart as well. Starting any business is a costly undertaking, and most people do not have this kind of money in the beginning stages. For example, Joseph Randol is a typical post-college graduate drowning in debt and student loans, but he dreams of starting a bagel business. Since funds were limited, he decided his best option was to start off small by first opening up a food cart to raise money. However, his plans were put on hold when he found out his idea was illegal (Street Vendors). A food cart would have been the perfect opportunity to help Randol establish his business. Food carts are a cheaper and more reasonable alternative to opening a restaurant which makes it a more accessible option for people wanting to start a food business. In Brooklyn, New York - where preparing food from a cart is allowed - Chef Duvaldi Marneweck spent about \$8,000 to get his little taco food stand started (Zimmer). This may seem like a lot of money but in comparison, food trucks range anywhere from \$28,100 to

\$114,100 to get started, while many restaurants have to put down more than \$1 million for real estate and equipment (Etter 3; Support Staff). Traditional “brick-and-mortar restaurants” worry that allowing street vendors the ability to cook their own food along with their mobile advantage creates a higher level of competition and an unfair playing field. Some restaurants in Chicago “will pay in the neighborhood of about \$160,000 in property tax” alone, yet street vendors can just make money by moving around without worrying about the cost of the ground they are standing on (Dougherty 65).

Although fixed restaurants are upset about food carts taking away their customers, the mobile advantages food carts have could benefit people who are not fortunate enough to enjoy the luxuries of dining in a restaurant or even going to the grocery store. By utilizing the unique characteristics of mobile food services, the city could work towards reaching out to local food deserts. These areas are characterized by the lack of major supermarkets and access to fresh fruits and vegetables, and Chicago’s West Side is a prime example of this due to disinvestments by grocery stores (Walker 1). The absence of grocery stores in these areas takes a toll on the overall health of the people because of their limited access to healthy, nutritional foods.

To solve this dietary gap, Chicago could utilize food carts to create a program similar to New York City’s Green Cart program. The Green Cart program designates a special status to food vendors who sell food that meets the Food and Drug Administration’s Nutrition Labeling criteria for “healthy” food such as fresh, unprocessed produce, and it gives vendors incentives to sell these healthier options to areas in need (Tester 5). Since Green Carts sell uncut and unprocessed produce, this would be legal to sell under the current food

vendor conditions. However, with the legalization of vending freshly prepared food, vendors could then take it a step further by creating and selling healthy meal options for people living in food deserts. The Green Cart program in New York still has certain kinks to work out such as vendor clustering and the fact that carts are not reaching areas that most need them (Lucan 5). In order to try and avoid these potential problems in Chicago, vendors could each be granted specific areas to sell in so that the Green Carts are evenly distributed throughout. Current city policy requires that every food unit be equipped with a working GPS system so if any problems arise, such as food safety complaints or location violations, the vendors could easily be tracked down (“Mobile Food”). The city should also seek to identify the neediest areas in Chicago and then designate a greater percentage of vendors in those areas. Also, to ensure that vendors are actually selling “healthy” food and not taking advantage of the system, randomized checks could be performed in order to monitor their products.

With Chicago’s food desert situation, food carts would be the better option even though food trucks are bigger and could potentially cover a greater area. However, because food carts are smaller, they could reach more areas that food trucks physically could not such as side streets and alleys. By having locations on the sidewalks, customers could readily find them and quickly stop by for a bite to eat. In this way, they would be easily accessible and approachable unlike food trucks that have to maneuver the streets to their location. This does not give them as many opportunities for additional customer interaction. Nonetheless, the food truck industry has been growing over the past few years but so have their prices. Food trucks have evolved to typically sell more high-end and

gourmet food. Some food trucks could even be viewed as restaurants as evidenced by the \$17 sandwiches from Alex Tsamouras' food truck "Feelin' Crabby" (McMillan). Some people do not mind paying for quality food, but realistically, this high-end food trend does not relate as well cost-wise nor food-wise to people living in lower-income neighborhoods.

Although food carts could be an innovative solution to reaching these disadvantaged neighborhoods, Chicago's street vendors have been struggling for a long time to change the rigid restrictions placed on them. In order to advance a step closer towards their goal of legalizing prepared foods, they need to focus on unifying their forces. Chicago street vendor unions should endeavor to structure a program similar to the Street Vendor Project (SVP) in New York. The SVP is a successful program that seeks to provide a voice for immigrant food vendors, help them handle the ropes of the complicated food business world, and ensure that they are protected and fully understand the laws and policies (Basinski 400). Creating a collective force will help street vendors effectively communicate their ideas and desires and assure City Council that they can conduct themselves professionally out on the streets. By having a centralized and unified workers' center, vendors would be educated in the rules and regulations of the food vending world, food safety, and business tips in order to ensure that everyone understands how to legally and safely run their business. Coming together and making a consolidated effort in this way would show the City Council the legitimacy of street food vending and perhaps finally swing the vote in their favor.

By receiving recognition from the City Council as actual street food vendors who sell fresh and original food, vendors would be allowed to finally have a hand in directly influencing Chicago's evolving, dynamic city culture. Since the food scenes have become

essential determinants of a city's cultural identity, handfuls of cities have been taking measures to improve the appeal of their food communities. However, "[w]ith every city pursuing the same set of policy initiatives, the result is not local distinctiveness but actually uniform experiences across places" (Martin 1880). Many cities have the same ideas of what the latest trends are such as the ever-popular food truck. Fleets of these trucks have descended upon cities across the country, but rather than following the norm, Chicago should seek to differentiate itself from other cities by focusing more on developing its eclectic street food community. A typical "foodie" loves to try any and all food so what could be more appealing than easy and accessible tastings from the whole world found in one area? Chicago has a booming tourist industry and by having delightful food carts situated around the city, tourists would have more opportunities to experience delicious bites of food on the go as they explore the city streets.

Chicago is a diverse and growing city and street food vendors have so much to offer if the city would give them the chance. Fresh street food would radically impact and change the Chicago community for the better since people from all areas and backgrounds would be touched by their presence in some way. Whether it is by providing a healthy meal option to someone who could not access one elsewhere or catering an authentic, culinary experience to a food lover on the hunt for the best local food stop, the legalization of street food would push Chicago past its competitors and out of its "status as [a] 'second [rate] city'" (Martin 1874) when it comes to its culinary spectrum. When street food vending is legalized, only then will the city truly live up to and embody its status as a culinary mecca.

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