



Stand-Out Food for Stand-Up Customers: The Border Grill Truck



Avocado Taco (*Lindsay William-Ross/LAist*)

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The lines were long--but moving--this weekend in the mobile food court section of the Abbot Kinney Festival. Posted along one branch of the annual street fair and community gathering were several of the city's trendiest restaurants, all on four wheels, among them [The NomNom Truck](#), [Get Shaved](#), and [Coolhaus](#). In line to get some grub at the Border Grill truck, however, a friend leaned over to me and asked: "So, is it that all these trucks are started up and run by really young people just getting into the business?"

I pointed at the truck directly in front of us. This truck may be staffed with energetic young people, I explained, but the duo behind the Border Grill truck has been in the business of food together for almost thirty years.

Granted, the [Border Grill truck](#) is in its infancy--a veritable spec of existence in comparison with [Susan Feniger and Mary Sue Milliken's](#) legacy of Los Angeles eateries, including the stalwart and popular [Border Grill in Santa Monica](#) and [Ciudad](#) in Downtown. But while [mobile food](#)--in its current Twittering, trend-setting form--is new territory, the Border Grill team brings their expertise to the table...along with their amazing assortment of hand-held Mexican and Latin American fare.

Of the trucks rolling along the streets of Los Angeles these days, Border Grill is one of the only ones stemming from an actual brick-and-mortar restaurant, which gives the team what the Chefs see as a unique advantage when it

comes to customer service. "We understand rushes," explains Feniger. "Service is something that we also constantly strive to improve, doing as much as we can for the customer." Being customer-minded means the staff try to see the truck experience from the other side of the order window. "We put ourselves in the shoes of the person standing there waiting and figure out what we can do to make the wait less long without harming the quality of the food," says Milliken.

Balancing the wait and food prep is a fine art, and in a restaurant on wheels--and in four walls--means having to be very flexible. Milliken explains that sometimes that means adjusting the menu to suit the equipment at hand (they currently lease two trucks) and knowing what preparations can be done ahead of time without compromising the quality of the food they serve.

So if there's a Border Grill that, barring the occasional earthquake, doesn't move from its spot on 4th in Santa Monica, why would someone want to eat from their truck? Milliken believes that while the menu may not have the same variety as at the restaurant, the truck is a great way to get food that's of the exact same quality, but more at affordable prices. And, granted, not everyone is at the doorstep of Border Grill when they're hungry. "People are a captive audience," elaborates Milliken, and "we can fill that need for them. LA is a hard place to get around--if you're Downtown, you're not going to drive to Border Grill to get a taco." That's where the truck culture comes in, she explains. "If you're somewhere there's not a lot of handy restaurants that's where we want to be."

And where they wind up is serving a crowd that's usually split between people who are already fans of the "Two Hot Tamales" and those who are getting to try their food for the first time, curbside. Feniger sees this as a pretty clear win-win: "People who are fans trust we are putting out a great product and people who don't know us try us and we think will love us, then say 'let's try the restaurant.'"

But taco trucks aren't fundamentally all that new to Los Angeles, which means customers have a lot of choices when it comes to tortillas filled with tasty meats and salsas. "I've got to say, there are some incredibly great tacos out there that have been on the streets of L.A. for decades," acknowledges Milliken. "And we're not competing with them--one doesn't replace the other--we're offering what's a little bit different." What's different is what Milliken refers to their "culinary view." She notes that she and Feniger have traveled all over the world, and "bringing that point of view, which is a little bit more influenced by a deep culinary training and understanding," makes the Border Grill truck not like the more traditional taco trucks around town.

That culinary point of view is what helped the team develop the menu, which includes a selection of tacos that each have a very distinct flavor profile, as well as adaptations of popular dishes like ceviche and a green corn tamale that are served in easy to handle paper cones, along with quesadillas, beverages, and dessert.

Ordering for the first time at the truck can be daunting, but the staff are always ready to help you pick something out and suggest their favorites. "If it were me, I'd order a potato rajas tacos, and a Yucatan pork taco, and a ceviche," advises Feniger. Milliken agrees the tacos are a good bet to start, with her favorites being the fish taco as well as the pork. "The ceviche I adore!" she exclaims.

But still, a taco is a taco, right? Well, not so much at the Border Grill truck. Their selection aims to offer tacos with "heightened flavor--excitement and delight on a taco," describes Milliken. To achieve this, they focused on ways to make the flavors more unique. For example, rather than offer a standard carnitas pork taco, they created a Yucatan style pork that's marinated in achiote and orange juice, cooked in banana leaves, and served topped with homemade pickled onion. And the fish taco, fried upon order, is brightened with a sweet hint of honey not expected in the dish.

Those small innovations for the palate are similar to how thoughtfully they considered getting some of the menu items on the plate, as well. "Our green corn tamales are favorites at all of the restaurants...but it can be a little challenging to unwrap a tamale while trying to eat at a truck. So we've translated the tamales into a cone that people love and it's very easy to eat too," adds Andrea Uyeda, Director of Operations.

Of course, getting that cone-wrapped tamale in your hands means you have to know where the truck is going to be. For that, the Border Grill turned to the most likely of places: The internet. Everyone behind the scenes at BG sees Twitter and Facebook as exciting and fun frontiers to be exploring these days. Milliken, a self-described "futuristic girl" counts herself as one of those who is excited about the mesh of technology and dining (though she admits she's not the one Twittering): "We live in an information age, and it's so interesting to me how it affects every walk of life, and how it affects the restaurant world in a way that's really exciting. To find out what's on the menu now people just wait for the Tweet to come."

In fact, this model of business-customer interaction really allows the restaurant to give their patrons exactly what they want. "Information is disseminated so quickly," observes Milliken. "You can choose to learn about updates or not to," and in the case of those who [fan the truck on Facebook](#) or [follow them on Twitter](#), these are "people [who] have chosen to be spoken to."

Adds Leah Ross, the restaurant's PR guru: "We are having so much fun interacting with fans and followers on Twitter and Facebook. And social media really is the best tool for getting the word out about where the truck will be in an immediate and effective way." And the people really are interacting. "My favorite Twitter/Facebook moment so far has been the great responses I got when I posted the question, 'In a fight between carne asada and carnitas, who would win?' People really came up with some creative and funny answers and it was exciting to connect with their enthusiasm for what we are doing with the Truck," she adds.

For Feniger, now "is the time" to "create energy using these tools," of technology, and Milliken agrees: "The mobility of the truck combined with the immediacy of the info we can disseminate to people who are interested combine to make it work-and work better than ever."

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So far it's working, which means while you may encounter the Border Grill truck in the coming weeks, the team behind the scenes has their eye on the next steps. Feniger and Milliken are already talking about ways to allow the menu to continue to evolve. "We're evaluating it every day, changing things around," notes Milliken. Some of the many "cool ideas" being tossed around include adding menu items, perhaps some inspired from the offerings of Ciudad. "I'm really interested in a sandwich, maybe some empanadas, seeing what else we can do beverage-wise," reflects Milliken. Also up for consideration is how to adapt the menu and the service to the season, like getting a tasty Mexican hot chocolate and soup on the menu for chillier days, and ways to make the dining experience more comfortable by setting up umbrellas and stools for patrons.

Of course, besides the food, there's that whole "on wheels" part of the business to think about. "We are evaluating it every day...buying a truck, expanding the truck, is there enough demand for us to do this...how do we grow the truck business..we're excited to explore all the different ways to do this because we think we fill a cool niche," adds Feniger.

With a truck, a set of more routine stops, and an ever-evolving menu, the Border Grill finds itself indeed crossing the border into this new landscape for food. The bottom line for them, of course, is the customer. "We want people to be able to eat and enjoy," emphasizes Milliken. "We don't want to hand them a bunch of unruly food they can't eat standing up."

By [Lindsay William-Ross](#) in [Food](#) on September 28, 2009 11:30 AM [1 Comment](#) [6 Likes](#)

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