

SHOPPING & DINING IN D.C.

Lifestyles, Retail and Restaurants in Northwest Washington

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Food trucks find second life as brick-and-mortar businesses

After time to hone concepts, brands get storefront homes

By **MARK LIEBERMAN**
Current Staff Writer

Each morning from 5 to 9:30 a.m., Stella*s PopKern in Petworth produces heaps of specialty popcorn, infused with a wide variety of flavors and ingredients cultivated by hand in-store. Some of that popcorn — 200 pounds per week — ends up on the Stella*s food truck, which heads to key lunch hubs most days. The rest stays behind at the brick-and-mortar Stella*s location, 4414 Georgia Ave. NW, where customers can often find owner Kristina Kern behind the counter.

The mountain of tasks every day is a lot to manage, she told The Current. “As with any small business, I have days where I’m so super happy and super excited, and I have other days where I want to jump off a cliff,” Kern said. “But I’m thrilled that I made the decision to go on.”

This bifurcated approach to running a food business represents one of several current modes for food truck operators in D.C., many of whom emerged during a flurry of excitement around mobile food half a decade ago. Many food truck owners who got their start then buckled

under the pressures of the industry, eventually halting business altogether. But some who persevered found ways to grow their business — either by adding a fixed storefront like Kern, or by transitioning fully to a brick-and-mortar establishment, leaving the truck behind.

The cafe Pleasant Pops parlayed a successful truck into two locations, one in Adams Morgan and the other downtown. Owners of the popular Vietnamese truck Phonation plan to open a restaurant at 11th and M streets NW in Logan Circle this month. The transition even extends to a dessert joint: Captain Cookie and the Milk Man, which now boasts two trucks and a permanent spot in Foggy Bottom near

George Washington University.

For Kern, the decision to ground her business in Petworth — just a 15-minute drive from Cleveland Park or Georgetown, she emphasizes — was a natural next step in the evolution of Stella*s. She had the idea for the eatery more than four years ago but wasn’t sure if enough customers would like it to justify a permanent storefront. At her mother’s suggestion, she started the food truck instead, operating for years out of a shared kitchen behind her current store.

The pressures of the job — space constraints, long hours, minimal employees — gradually wore her down. But when the space fronting Georgia Avenue opened up, she saw an opportunity. Now she’s built up her staff, and is working to establish Stella*s as a destination for D.C. snackers, with popcorn flavors like Dark French Chocolate Drizzle and Basil Lemongrass with Ginger Sea Salt that rotate every week.

Kern says she still operates her business with the goal of answering this question: “What makes someone buy my product at a premium versus just going into CVS and buying a bag of no-name or brand-name popcorn that’s produced in some factory?”

A permanent location brings its own set of challenges. For Kern, building out and designing the storefront, with its sleek white walls and glass cases, required the help of a Great

Streets Small Business grant from the city. Meanwhile, Pleasant Pops co-founder Roger Horowitz told The Current that he and his fellow food truck operators weren’t prepared for the avalanche of bills attached to every aspect of running a brick-and-mortar business, or for the shock of the staff size multiplying by 10 seemingly overnight.

Still, running a food truck first helped Horowitz gain perspective and establish early interest.

“It was really important from an experience point of view to see what the food truck entails,” he said. “Before I invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt into a business, do people like my product? Do people think this is a good idea?”



Brian Kapur/The Current

Stella*s and Captain Cookie both started as food trucks before putting down roots.

Food trucks can be useful from an advertising perspective, but keeping one successful long-term requires grit. When Kirk Francis, co-owner of Captain Cookie and the Milk Man, bought an old Washington Post delivery truck via Craigslist in 2010, he wasn’t prepared for the daily headaches of the business. Francis said he worked 100 hours a week for his first three-and-a-half years, and he gained countless vehicle repair skills during that time because his truck was prone to malfunctions.

“Stuff is always breaking,” Francis said. “Many, many times did I find myself on the side of the road at midnight or the middle of rush hour.”

He also frequently bumped into the city’s labyrinthine food truck regulations, which limit such vehicles’ sizes to 18 feet, 6 inches. Francis had to cut the front and back bumpers off of his truck to fulfill that requirement. At least that requirement was clear-cut, though — before the city had fully gotten a handle on its food truck policies, conflicting information and inefficient paperwork kept Francis constantly in fear of violating a regulation he hadn’t seen.

Even with all of those headaches, the lifelong dessert baker still doesn’t regret his experience running Captain Cookie out of a truck. He zeroed in on Foggy Bottom as a permanent home after seeing a crush of George Washington University students flock to the truck upon each visit. When space at 2000 Pennsylvania Ave. NW opened up in 2014, Francis put in a bid for the hotly contested site and won.

“Food trucks are big rolling billboards,” Francis said. “Even if you’re just breaking

even or profiting a little bit, you’re building a lot of notoriety to your brand and that’s only going to help.”

Sometimes that recognition isn’t enough. Kangaroo Boxing Club began as a food truck and ran a permanent shop in Columbia Heights for four years before closing in December. The sandwich truck El Floridano opened the Park View restaurant Mothership via Kickstarter donations in 2013, but it closed two years later. Owner Stephen Boillon told the Washington City Paper at the time that he didn’t have “deep enough pockets” to continue.

Meanwhile, food trucks including District Taco, TaKorean, DC Empanadas and Curbside Cupcakes have transitioned to full-fledged businesses in recent years.

For Horowitz, the decision to abandon the truck and focus on the brick-and-mortar business came down to priorities. “I have a family, I have a baby, I have a life,” Horowitz said. “The last thing I want to do is [have to respond] when someone breaks down on the truck coming back from [catering] a wedding in Winchester, Va. I don’t have that same desire to get that phone call anymore.”

But Kern sees an opportunity for each end of the business to support the other. The value of getting her business’ name out there outweighs the heavy workload, and support from Petworth residents has convinced her that she made the right decision. Adding a second store or more trucks, however, is still a long way in the future.

“My business philosophy has always been, ‘Start really small,’” Kern said. “Right now I’m really focusing on learning this before I expand.”



Susann Shin/The Current

Phonation will launch its first storefront location in Logan Circle.

Chocolate, coffee bar to open in Penn Quarter

Café Chocolat, a boutique chocolate and coffee bar, is set to debut in Penn Quarter this spring.

The Neighborhood Retail Group firm announced recently that it helped Café Chocolat secure its new location in the Southern Building at 1423 H St. NW. In a release, the firm says the cafe’s founder, Gjergj Dollani, “created the ‘beans to bar’ concept as a place to discover

and experience the best in high-end chocolate and specialty coffee.”

“Café Chocolat will be a unique destination among the East End’s luxury shopping, dining, hotel and entertainment district,” Bethany Scanlon, managing principal of the Neighborhood Retail Group, says in the release. “Gjergj has created the premiere destination for a chocolate experience, sweet treat and perfect gift in DC.”

The cafe’s website, cafechoc-

olatdc.com, says more specific details are coming soon.

Farm-to-fork restaurant names new sous chef

Melrose Georgetown has tapped Patrick Knott as sous chef for the West End hotel’s farm-to-fork restaurant, Jardenea.

Knott previously worked in kitchens at Wiltwyck Golf Club in Kingston, N.Y.; Hotel Jerome Auberge Resort in Aspen, Colo.; and Chevy Chase Club in Chevy

Chase, Md., according to a release.

At Jardenea, at 2430 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Knott works closely with executive chef Nelson Erazo to direct food preparation, supervise culinary staff, and develop and execute seasonal menus, according to the release.

Erazo, in the release, says Knott’s “ability to create imaginative and fresh menu items makes him an extraordinary addition to the Melrose culinary

team.”

Jardenea, whose name is derived from the French word “jardin” for garden, offers a menu that rotates each season “to mirror current regional flavors,” according to the release.

Melrose Georgetown is part of Remington Hotels’ collection of luxury hotels and resorts. The art-deco inspired boutique hotel was ranked No. 2 in Washington by Condé Nast Traveler Readers’ Choice Awards, the release says.