

Tripping the Food Truck Fantastic

By Jeffrey Kocher

Saratoga Springs residents anticipate the first signs of spring. The crocuses are blooming, winter coats are put away, and Kathy Kahl has returned from Florida to sell her smoked hot dogs, bratwurst, and kielbasa.

Each spring, Kahl sets up her food truck—technically a custom-built trailer and accompanying wood-fired barbeque smoker—in the spacious parking lot located at 112 Excelsior Avenue, home of Saratoga Quality Hardware and EBI Beverage Center in Saratoga Springs. She has been located at her current location for the last seven out of ten years of business operation. Kahl re-opened this year on April 4th after wintering in Clearwater. Local residents have been stopping by and welcoming back a smiling Kahl.

Kathy Kahl is a pioneer in the local food truck industry. Kahl operates the aptly named Saratoga Awesome Dogs featuring what else, the Awesome Dog, a hot dog with Kahl's special meat sauce. "I was pretty much the first one around," says Kahl about operating a food truck in Saratoga Springs. "I love to cook, be outside, and talk to people. This is what I always wanted to do."

In 2009, U.S. cities experienced what has widely been described as the food truck phenomenon—an explosion of food truck businesses across America. Los Angeles established the market for crafty, entrepreneurial chefs to launch their businesses during cash-strapped recessionary times. The movement quickly spread to most major cities throughout the United States. Lower start-up costs, less risk, and less reliance on employees are the major factors for choosing a food truck over a traditional brick-and-mortar restaurant. As a result, there are currently two hundred food trucks on the road in Los Angeles. One of the trucks is Kogi BBQ operated by Roy Choi. Choi has been serving his specialty Korean/Mexican fusion tacos since 2009. Choi was the first food truck chef to land on *Food and Wine* magazine's Best New Chefs list. Choi's award gave the food truck industry mainstream acceptance which helped override a pervasive "roach coach" mentality.

Owning a food truck can be challenging. Food truck owners deal with a myriad of headaches which include onerous city regulations, parking difficulties, bad weather, truck maintenance, and long hours. The biggest obstacle facing food truck owners is working around the parking difficulties. Kahl solves this problem by remaining stationary at her current location. "I went to the owner and told him 'I like your parking lot, would you like to lease me your lot?' The first year I could have read a book all day. I didn't make enough money to pay for a package of hot dogs. But, you do not give up...If you have a good product, slowly in two or three years you will get there," says Kahl.

Saratoga Awesome Dogs was recently awarded the *Saratogian's* 2013 Readers Choice Award for Best Hot Dog. Kahl attributes her notable food to barbequing her meats with a smoker. "It [the BBQ smoker] intrigues me. Outside barbeque is the best, especially with wood. A lot of people do not realize this is wood. The wood fire brings out the flavor in the food."

Kahl also attributes her success to hard work and using top ingredients. She uses all beef Sabrett hot dogs and wakes up at 4:00 or 5:00 a.m. to make a big batch of her meat sauce and to do her chopping. "You better know what you are getting into," says Kahl. "You prep all morning, and cook all day. You have to have a passion for what you want to do."

Like Kathy Kahl, David Britton chooses the New York North Country for his food truck business. At the end of May 2009, the lease for Britton's popular Springwater Bistro in Saratoga Springs expired. Britton decided not to renew his lease. He wanted to take his culinary talents in a different direction. While also operating the Springwater, Britton had been appearing as a sous chef on Robert Irvine's Food Network show *Dinner: Impossible*. The show pits Irvine and his team against a variable of hurdles: time, limited resources, and less-than-convenient cooking conditions. These hurdles must be overcome to feed a large group of people. In addition to the Food Network show, Britton was the Managing Partner of the Saratoga Polo and Catering Company where he was involved working with a wood-fired oven. "I really enjoyed that oven," says Britton. The experiences of continual movement on the Food Network show and using a wood-fired oven in Saratoga gave birth to his Pies-On Wheels traveling pizzeria concept.

Pies-On Wheels is a 6,500 lb. Earthstone wood-fired oven mounted on a twenty-six feet long by ten feet wide truck. The truck can carry a total 30,000 pounds. "If you have seen the truck, it really rolls down the street with an impression," says Britton. "We went big." Britton designed the truck with the health department in mind, configuring the refrigeration and running water. "It is fifty percent kitchen, fifty percent truck, but it is never 50/50. It has to be able to be either all truck on the road or all kitchen when we arrive at our destination. The design is to support the oven wherever we are."

Britton offers high-end, wood-fired pizzas at an affordable cost. "We are price sensitive to the area we are in," says Britton. The oven is heated to an optimal 700 degrees Fahrenheit. This temperature allows the pizza to cook quickly without burning it. All pizzas are custom made fresh to order. "A minute to make, a minute to bake. We don't do anything in advance." The most popular menu item is the Pizza Margarita made with crushed tomatoes, fresh basil, and Fleur de Latte fresh mozzarella. "It is the purest of everything--a nice cheese pizza."

Britton likes to interact with his customers and include them in the cooking process. “The way that truck rumbles...when I pull up...we fold, we toss, we are able to interact with the people. The kids get to play with the pies. The whole thing is an experience for everybody in addition to the quality of the food. It’s a show,” says Britton.

Britton has adapted his business model for Pies-On Wheels to conform with living in upstate New York. “To live in the upstate area, you have to create opportunity. You have to do different things,” says Britton. Seventy percent of Britton’s business is pre-registered private parties. Twenty-five percent of Britton’s business is events such as the Adirondack Balloon Festival and a forty-day residency at the Saratoga Race Course. The remaining five percent is filled doing vending. Britton also sells sponsorships with premium products that he uses for his ingredients. “We have a franchise discipline. We are so tight--the sauce we use, the product we use, the procedures we use--that in theory, with some adjustments, we could franchise.”

Britton’s business strategy is effective. “I’m the busiest pizzeria in town during the summer,” he says about operating in Northern New York. To meet demand, Britton recently ordered another wood-fired pizza truck and is creating a trailer with a six-foot-long Churrasco grill. The Churrasco is a slowly rotating chain-driven grill that is so versatile it can skewer anything. Britton plans to grill his brined chicken wings on the skewers. The wings are served with six proprietary garlic sauces and have been researched and test marketed for the last 2 ½ years. Britton says about his chicken wings, “People are going crazy over them.” The Churrasco grill will be able to cook over 1,000 chicken wings at a time.

Pies-On Wheels is entering its fifth year of business. Britton continues to nurture and grow the business. “The expansion has been methodical and not ego driven. We have a proven track record. Everything is paid for and the expansion is like any other business approach. The kiss of death is to expand before you are ready.” Britton plans to launch the wing wagon at the Food Truck Festival in Troy on May 4th.

Food trucks are the fastest-growing segment in the dining industry. In June, Jeff Inglee plans to join the wave of popularity that food trucks are enjoying by opening the Smoke Shack BBQ Pit at 143 Broad Street, a barren lot halfway between downtown Glens Falls and exit 18 of the Northway.

Like Dave Britton and Kathy Kahl, Inglee has figured out a way to take the food truck concept and adapt it to the local business environment. Inglee researched buying an existing food truck but realized the cost was too high. He decided to become creative. “My brainstorm idea was to take an office trailer and convert it. I’m a general contractor by trade. We are going to take a mobile office and turn it into a

mobile kitchen,” says Inglee. The 10’x24’ trailer is being leased from Williams Scotsman located in Rotterdam. “Williams Scotsman is excited about it. The company may potentially take this idea of mine and use it as a prototype to send the trailers as kitchens to disaster areas. It is an interesting concept.”

Like Kahl, Inglee is leasing a permanent site—his is at the corner of Broad and Fielding in Glens Falls. “If I couldn’t find the right site, I wasn’t going to follow through with it,” says Inglee. The site is one hundred feet by one hundred feet and it is equipped with electrical, water, and septic lines with plenty of parking. A house used to stand on the grounds. “It is a great lot, a great location.” Inglee has already talked with the lot’s owner about a proposed purchase if the venture works out.

Like Kahl, Inglee will specialize in BBQ smoked meats. The lunch and dinner menu will consist of chicken, sausage, beef brisket, ribs, and pulled pork. Simple side dishes will include smoked beans, potato salad, corn bread, and hard rolls. Inglee anticipates workers stopping for lunch and having a piece of hickory smoked chicken, fresh salad and enjoying the fresh air. “Once you satisfy somebody’s taste buds, it is pretty interesting to watch their reaction. It is going to be a lot of fun,” says Inglee.

The impetus for Inglee’s BBQ Shack came to him twofold. “I was thinking with today’s ever-growing fast-paced society, a good percentage of people depend on fast-food establishments to get them through the day. It is a fact of life these days. These little genuine BBQ places down south are springing up left and right. There is not a lot of competition up here, so with that in mind, that is what we are up to,” says Inglee. Inglee’s BBQ Shack does have a connection to the south. His pit master, Lee, is from the heart of Tennessee.

Also, Inglee, age 58, is feeling the urge to venture out. “There has to be more to life than one profession,” he says. “This is an enterprising world we live in. Anybody who has ambition and drive can make a go of it here. God bless America.”

Inglee is excited about the Smoke Shack and is confident he will succeed. “If you talk to a successful entrepreneur, they do not dive into their business with negative thoughts. They dive into these things with a positive attitude and a great outlook that is going to be successful. Now my contracting business turned out to be successful because we worked very, very hard to establish and make it successful. The same thing [holds true] in the food industry. If you have shitty food, you are going to fail. If you have good food, a good product and you get repeat customers, then you are going to be successful,” says Inglee.