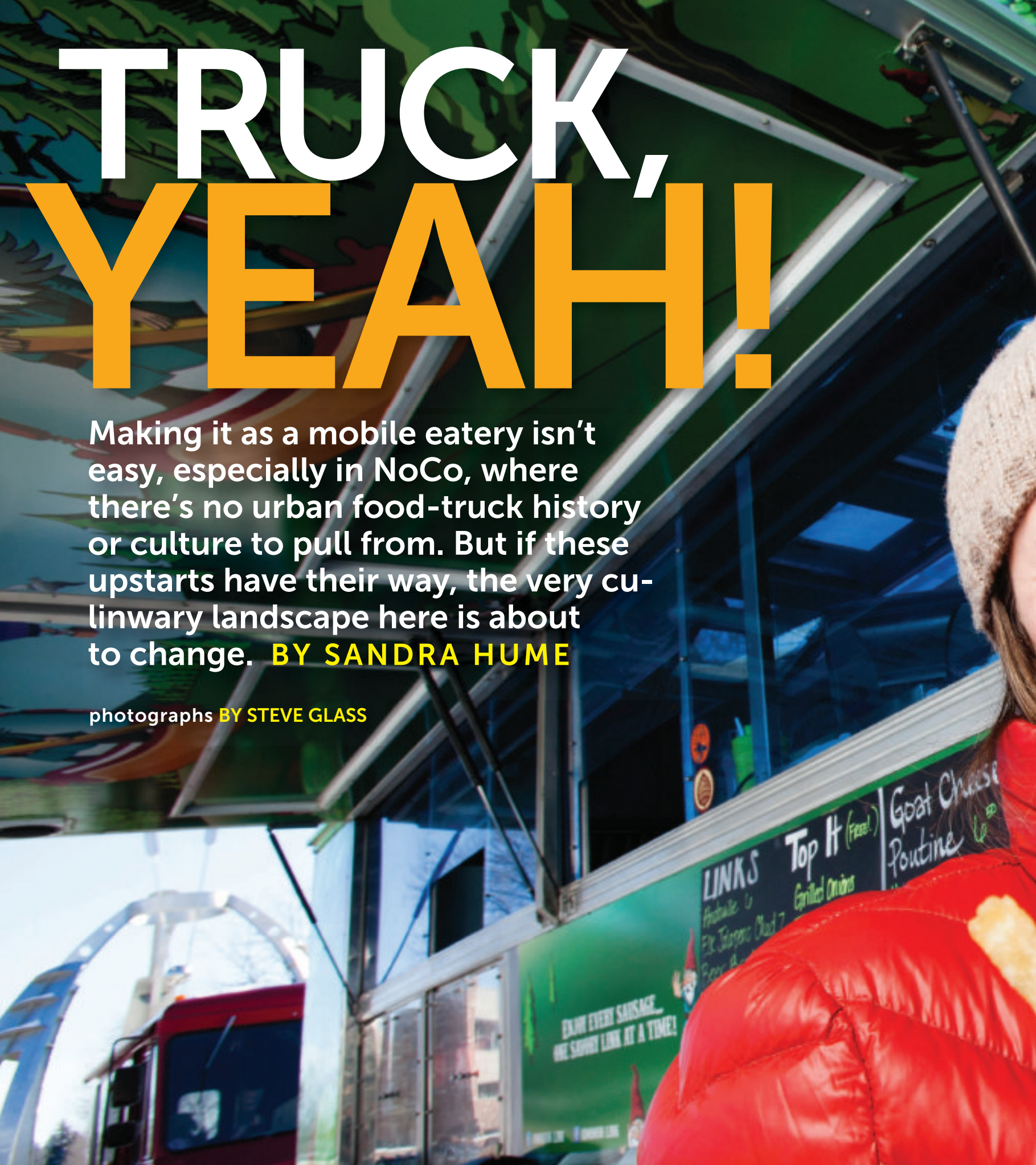


TRUCK, YEAH!

Making it as a mobile eatery isn't easy, especially in NoCo, where there's no urban food-truck history or culture to pull from. But if these upstarts have their way, the very culinary landscape here is about to change. **BY SANDRA HUME**

photographs **BY STEVE GLASS**





Common-Link's husband-and-wife proprietors Jessica Doerffel and Derrick Smith pilot a gnome-bedecked green truck, serving up sausages, hand-cut fries, and a reminder to not take life too seriously.

BY THE NUMBERS*



23%

number of food truck customers surveyed who follow favorite trucks on Twitter and Facebook

T WAS THE DEPTHS OF FEBRUARY, 2013. Parked at Equinox Brewery, Ryan Martin was questioning his ability to get through the winter. The previous summer's business for Umami, the pan-Asian food truck he ran out of a converted Airstream, proved trucking had been a risk worth taking. But this first winter? Was doing him in. "And that was a mild winter," he remembers. He swore it would be the last winter he'd keep his window open.

Then a car pulled up to Equinox. The driver, in a friendly-sounding southern accent, asked Martin if he'd be interested in setting up shop at CSU. Martin said he was. The driver thanked him and drove off, leaving Martin perplexed. "I didn't even know who he was."

That driver was Robert Peters, Director of Dining Services at CSU. Impending renovations of the Lory Student Center meant CSU students were going to be minus a food court. Could food trucks fill the gap? These gourmet meals on wheels had just begun to sink into Fort Collins' culinary psyche. "Robert put the word out to a few places he was familiar with"—like Umami and mobile sausage specialist Common-Link—"and word spread like wildfire," says Joyce Durol, CSU's associate director of dining services. Durol investigated the possibilities herself, and her checklist was specific: "We wanted something stable and consistent, with student-friendly pricing and featuring a variety of foods—not two or three pizza trucks." In the end, Umami, Common-Link, flatbread-sandwich vendor La Piadina, and Ba-Nom-a-Nom—a vegan ice cream alternative made solely from fruit—were regular fixtures on campus. The move wasn't without challenges: trucks had to simplify their menus for quicker

Peter Berglund's Rolling Bistro actually rolls little these days—he's found permanent parking adjacent to Fort Collins Nursery on East Mulberry, where on warm evenings he hosts the occasional al fresco open-mike night.



service and lower prices, and as temps dropped Ba-Nom-a-Nom added hot food to its roster. But overall, it was a universal win. "By the end of that first winter I was just scraping through. This one, I'm actually turning a profit," Martin said in December of 2013.

In food truck land, survival is everything. And in Fort Collins, survival means something a little bit different. As foodie-friendly as our not-quite-Boulder, not-quite-Denver landscape is, you'd think what amounts to a gourmet outdoor meal would be a no-brainer. But culinary paradigm shifts are harder to pull off. The recipe for success, it turns out, is part innovation, part regulation, and part something distinctly NoCo. Everyone wants it to work. Whether it will, well... we may just have to see how the Sriracha settles.

THE WOMAN WAS ABOUT 60, Bill Almquist estimated. From his vantage point inside the Waffle Lab, he could see her disgusted look as she read the side of his truck. "Waffles?" she said. "Ugh, God, I can't even imagine." Almquist watched her disappear inside New Belgium Brewing, and "a fire lit under my butt." Ten minutes later he presented her with a fresh plate of his liege waffles, saying, "I happened to hear you go by, and I'd love for you to try this out—it's entirely on me." In minutes the woman was back, gushing about how delicious the food was.

Despite the raging-hot national trend for high-concept mobile food, the gulf between trucks and their longstanding "roach coach" reputation still needs the occasional bridge. Which is why Almquist will willingly give chase, waffles in hand, to educate the dining public.

It's personal, too. Without a back kitchen or waitstaff to separate chef from diner, these are the kinds of victories that matter. For a lot of food-truck proprietors, trucks are a lower-cost way to get food in people's hands without risking everything on a brick-and-mortar restaurant—if you even have enough to risk. "I've created the whole menu from scratch, put so much effort

into it," Pineapple Express proprietor Chris Albete said in a YouTube video posted last year. Hearing customers praise his Hawaiian fare in the moment, to his face, "means so much more." Jessica Doerffel, who runs the gnome-decorated Common-Link truck with her husband, Derrick Smith, loves recognizing her repeat customers, like Jack, the retired UNC professor and cyclist who is always good for some hand-cut fries, or Barbara and Bob, who never fail to text their order ahead of time. "It's awesome to see the friendly faces. They make us feel loved."

Repositioning the food-truck image means turning traditional cuisine on its ear, offering something fresh, different, and specialized for those who want to come out for it. It means sourcing locally. Cooking food to order. Offering something no one else is, and better than anyone else could. Quite simply, it means pleasing the people.

The people are pleased. Lines at the first public food truck rally in 2013 and at that year's Taste of Fort Collins were 45 minutes to an hour long. Mi-

* sources: Ibis, Zagat, and Food and Agricultural Organization of the U.N.

13: Number of independent food truck businesses that call Fort Collins home

3.9% national food truck industry annual growth in the last 5 years



chael Kirkpatrick of local bluegrass band The Holler! swears that Pineapple Express's fried rice balls "literally changed my entire world." Local fan Adrianna Harcourt considers Umami's dumplings "divinity in a wonton wrapper"; Caldera Event Group employee Rob Malara claims their tacos could have come from the street food carts he sampled in California. "I just pretend I'm in L.A.," he says from the New Belgium patio. "But with good beer."

And then there's me. People who know me know I'm not the type of person to be all You have to try this kale tofu salad, but there I was, at Paddler's Pub north of town on a hot August night, trumpeting that particular Umami special to anyone who would listen. And the first time I sampled Rolling Bistro's steak and cheese at the Kite Festival in 2012, I finished my sandwich, threw the wrapper away, and returned to the truck's window—not to buy another, but to tell the proprietor it was the best steak and cheese I'd ever had. I'd never done that before, with any food, anywhere. But he had to *know*.

THE CONTEMPORARY AGE of the Fort Collins food truck began in 2011, when the city council adopted new licensing and parking regulations making it easier for mobile eateries to be, well, mobile. Food trucks started popping up in and around Old Town, at events, and in brewery parking lots. But as those who are still here have learned, operating a FoCo food truck takes a special kind of perseverance. Compared to places like Portland, L.A., Austin, or even Denver, Fort Collins' food-truck scene is still in preschool—and it may stay there.

It's tough enough just being a food truck in general. For one, business is unpredictable. "One day we will sell 200 cupcakes and another we'll sell five—for any number of reasons, most of which we don't know until we get to the stop that day," says Kati Anderson, whose Cupcake Cruiser was the first food truck to be licensed in Fort Collins, in 2011.

Also, the upfront costs can be risky. "Just to show up someplace, we're a couple hundred dollars in the hole," says Almquist. "There's labor, staff, gas to get there, propane, food costs, sometimes a set-up fee for events...if we don't sell what we expect, we end up having to throw or give food away. It's not like we can just pack up and go home." And then there's rent to pay, water and wastewater to consider, electricity to be had, permits to pay and navigate. Admits Almquist: "I like the mobility aspect, but it's also the biggest pain in the ass."

It was such a pain in the ass to Peter Berglund, of Rolling Bistro, that after opening his window at a handful of events, he parked his truck. Permanently. Now, working out of a stationary truck adjacent to Fort Collins Nursery on East Mulberry, he couldn't be happier. The former marine and personal chef at Vice



Some of the most successful food trucks are run by couples married to the biz and/or each other. Ryan Martin and fiancée Chelsea Veltri are the duo behind Umami, serving up dumplings, curry, and other pan-Asian fare.

President Dick Cheney's Idaho mountain lodge has found a new groove—he's built out his patio, added seating and lights, and hosts open-mike nights when the weather invites it, often bringing out his own guitar. "I don't have a job," Berglund insists. "I feed people great food—and I love every second of it."

Then there's the weather, which can render any given business day Sisyphean. High winds compromise heating and venting enough that on blustery days, Rolling Bistro simply won't open. And last December's freak cold snap? "Literally every pipe underneath our trailer was busted in one way or another," remembers Almquist. And no one wants to wait in line in the cold. As a result, come post-holiday January, most of our food trucks take a hiatus.

Most tricky of all are the regulations, which are so confusing even Almquist, whose previous career as a city planner in Oregon puts him at a significant advantage, can't seem to grasp all the ins and outs. "Even the people I'm talking with seem confused," he says.

BY THE NUMBERS*



2.5 billion

number of people who eat street food daily, globally

“It’s odd because we’ve always been ahead of the game with food here, but when it comes to food trucks, we’re behind the times,” says Danielle Gilbert Iglehart, whose commissary kitchen of her co-owned specialty-food company, Gilberto’s, serves as a base for several of Fort Collins’ food trucks. (All trucks are required by law to have a commissary base, a commercial kitchen for dishwashing, deliveries, food storage, etc.)

Part of it is simply the nature of Fort Collins. It’s a pretty small city, comparatively, when you consider food-truck behemoths like Austin or L.A. or Portland, Oregon—arguably the food-truck capital of the country, with more than 500 food trucks and carts grouped into dedicated “pods.” “In Portland, you walk by one of those parking lots and you have 10 to 12 choices right there,” says Matt Jaspers, former Portlander who coordinates the food truck schedule at Odell Brewing Company. In Fort Collins we typically see one truck at a time, and the most allowed to gather simultaneously on any private location is four. That’s a situation that can make the friendly competition of the city’s food-truck community a little, well, less friendly. “Only four food trucks?” says Almquist. “How do you choose? Do you draw straws?”

Indeed, this is a universal sentiment among food-truck operators: the desperate need for a place to gather. Cities as close as Longmont and Boulder host food-truck rallies, and Fort Collins’ truckers are hoping their own city will follow suit. Not only is the four-truck cap limiting from a competitive standpoint, but licensing and other expenses make such events almost cost-prohibitive. The city did grant permission for two public rallies last summer in Washington Park, with a percentage of proceeds earmarked for community causes. But success was mixed. While the first drew huge crowds, parking problems made the city subsequently reconsider the second one; it only went on as planned because by the time the city tried to pull the plug, it had already been publicized. Almquist, who used his city-planning skills to

help organize both rallies, says it turned out to be an “ugly night” weather-wise, ill-attended, with only scant money raised for the event’s beneficiary, flood victims. “[The city] pretty much said, ‘This is the last one.’”

The city, for its part, is working to make things better, but that means being sensitive to everyone—brick-and-mortar businesses and residents as well as the food truck operators—and considering noise, parking, and everything else that goes along with high-traffic gatherings in places that aren’t necessarily zoned for such things, says Jessica Ping-Small, Revenue and Project Manager for the city of Fort Collins. One of this winter’s projects was to consult with all of the affected parties and engage in public outreach to find solutions that would work for everyone. “We want the food trucks to be successful, and we support them being able to get together. We just need to make sure we think it through.”

While food truck owners understand and both sides of the equation are respectful of one another, anxiety exists. “There just aren’t enough spots outside the Old Town core where there is enough foot traffic to sustain more than a handful of trucks in the long run,” says Almquist.

There’s already been one casualty. Last summer the ill-named Broze and Hoze attempted to capitalize on a student demographic, slowly proving that food-truck success isn’t a guarantee. “I don’t think they really knew Fort Collins,” says Kristin Mastre, blogger at Feasting Fort Collins. “They could have made something of themselves, especially as a late-night option. But appealing to only a CSU niche—I personally would never bring my kids there—that’s only going to sustain you for so long.” The truck lasted four months.

FOR WOULD-BE FOOD-TRUCKERS, it pays to plan. Before opening their window on New Year’s Day 2013, Common-Link’s Doerffel and Smith researched their business for a full year. They both have long careers in food hospitality, and they wanted to make sure that this new, weird life they ditched

* sources: Ibis, Zagat, and Food and Agricultural Organization of the U.N.

GET SOME

If customers have one quibble about food trucks, it’s finding them. Aside from Odell’s online truck calendar,



CUPCAKE CRUISER

facebook.com/
thecupcakecruiser
@gocupcakecruiser

TRY: Beer-infused cupcakes



UMAMI

facebook.com/
umamieats
@umamimobile

TRY: Curries, dumplings



WAFFLE LAB

facebook.com/
TheWaffleLab
@TheWaffleLab

TRY: The Big Caprese, chicken and waffles



THE GOODNESS

facebook.com/
thegoodnesstruck
@goodnesstruck

TRY: Kettle crisps, the Hogfather (pork/sausage/prosciutto)



COMMON-LINK

common-link.net/
(includes calendar)
@commonlinkftc
facebook.com/
Common.LinkFTC

TRY: Poutine, jalapeno elk sausage

\$75,000 the average cost of a new, tricked out food truck

\$1 billion total U.S. street food industry revenue



their full-time jobs for would stick.

And food truck life is a weird life. But it's a good, embraceable weird—take the fly-fishing, bike-riding gnomes decorating Common-Link's exterior who "remind us not to take ourselves too seriously," says Doerffel. Today, she's on New Belgium's patio taking advantage of a slow period when she hears, "There you are!" Brian "Burny" Finkle, ten-year veteran of New Belgium (official title: Liquid Center Representative), has something for her: a keychain from La Chouffe Brewery in Belgium, decorated with their elf mascot. "I've had this for years and I've been meaning to give it to you," he tells her. "When I saw all the gnomes [on your truck], I knew you had to have it."

It's no accident that at least three of the successful food trucks are run by couples; often it's a life that only a partner can love. Martin's own relationship went south in the wake of starting Umami; now he and the employee he hired as a replacement, Chelsea Veltri, are engaged. In this crazy food-truck life, having people you can count on and trust make all the difference.

"Beer helps as well," Doerffel says.

OUTSIDE THE TRUCK, many other new relationships have been sown by Fort Collins' food-truck boom, not the least of which is that between the trucks and the city's breweries. "It's symbiotic," says Odell's Jaspers. "We're a brewery; we want to make good beer, not food. And they make good food." The effects work both ways. "People drive by on Lincoln and see Common-Link and say 'Oh man, I'm hungry,' so they stop in—and then they say 'Well, I might as well have a beer while I'm here.' I've seen it happen."

Beer finds its way into the food, too. The Goodness food truck infuses its half-pound Colorado beef cheeseburgers with a porter from the brewery they're stationed at that day. The cheese spread on Common-Link's UnCom-mon burger is made with an Odell IPA, and even the Cupcake Cruiser has

beer cupcakes on the menu.

That two-way street is a NoCo food-truck theme. Supporting each other means supporting Fort Collins. These guys love NoCo. Cozy Cow Cheese in Windsor, Fiddletown Bakery, The Shire CSA—mobile menus pack as local of a punch as possible. Common-Link struck up a partnership almost immediately with the Mayor of Old Town, which the truck now uses as its commissary. Doerffel, now in her thirties, remembers Bob Peters of Dining Services—who ultimately invited her truck to campus—as a supportive leader back when she was a Restaurant and Resort Management major at CSU.

The truck owners also get this: working together means success for everyone. Menus remain individual, just different enough to avoid directly competing. Several share commissaries. Umami supplies Pineapple Express' tofu from its own substantial order. If one truck can't make a scheduled date at a brewery, calls are made and someone else rolls into the spot. It's carefully calibrated teamwork within a community that's far more close-knit than segregated. "It is a restaurant, and yes, we all have to make money. But if you're going to screw someone over, you've met them face to face..." Martin says, trailing off in an *It's your funeral* way.

The larger community has embraced them as well, from supportive stories in the Coloradoan to Mastre's frequent, in-depth reviews on Feasting Fort Collins. In her end-of-year "Best of 2013" list, fully half of the eateries—four out of eight—were food trucks. Even if the numbers and locations can't rival somewhere like Portland or L.A., at least the food can. And if NoCo can do that part right, maybe a truck-friendly set of regs can follow. As the customers will tell you, food that good is worth rallying for. **FC**

SANDRA HUME is a writer in Fort Collins. She won't ever tell you what her favorite food truck is.

chasing down lunch means checking a combination of website, Facebook, or Twitter.



BA-NOM-A-NOM

facebook.com/
banomanom

TRY: Root beer float
with banana soft serve



PINEAPPLE EXPRESS

facebook.com/pages/
Pineapple-Express-
FoCo/258387594283794
@PineappleKalani

TRY: Rice balls,
Spam musubi



ROLLING BISTRO

2121 East Mulberry at
Fort Collins Nursery

TRY: Philly steak and
cheese with diablo sauce



**SHIRE FOOD TRUCK
(FROM SHIRE CSA)**

@shirefoodtruck
shirefoodtruck.com
instagram.com/
shirefoodtruck#

Coming later in 2014



**BITCHIN' B'S
COMFORT FOOD TRUCK**

bitchin-b.com
facebook.com/
biscuitcomfortfood

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