

Opinion

Food trucks are driven to stay in Southwestern Illinois

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

If you happen to start reading this before breakfast, lunch or supper, be prepared to wait until after your meal. Or, perhaps, read this and then plan your meal.



Grubaugh

Today's food for thought is for the "cibus amans" among you. That is Latin for food lover. In France, it would be "amoureux de la nourriture." In German, it would be "essensliebhaber." In Spanish, it would be "amante de la comida."

Like my wife going over recipes, I had to look all those up. The only international language I know is what's on the plate in front of me. The language that binds all of us.

And that brings me to relish delving into the burgeoning world of food trucks, a veritable cornucopia of which are popping up in Metro East. Tacos, ribs, gyros, chicken — you name it.

These little mobile kitchens have been around seemingly forever, at special events, sporting venues and roadside stops, but now they are becoming big

business, to the point where individual communities have had to come up with rules of regulation. If you're on the local town board, take note: Update your ordinances. Food trucks are here to stay.

In Edwardsville, where I live, everybody's been talking about the new Sneaky's Burger Truck, which is cooking up 100 percent wagyu beef burgers and plant-based impossible burger patties at Recess Brewing in downtown.

The City Council recently amended its code to accommodate the craze. Food trucks that are properly permitted and licensed by Madison County and the City of Edwardsville are now able to operate in more places with expanded hours. Trucks may operate on private commercial property and serve the community at three of the city's parks. Food trucks are still prohibited from operating on private property in a residential district but may operate in a residential district as part of a city-approved block party or city-operated event.

Food trucks may also operate on city property or public right-of-way owned by the City of Edwardsville in a commercial or manufacturing district. Food trucks may only operate in the same location four times per month and are restricted to the hours of 7 a.m. to 2 a.m. However, trucks may operate on an unlimited basis, 24 hours per day in the M-1 Light Manufacturing District.

Alton recently made the news when it announced this month's planned opening of "Flock," a building set up at 210 Ridge St. between Broadway and Landmarks Boulevard, adjacent to the Jacoby Arts Center.

Operated by local restaurateur Laura Windisch and her husband Matt, Flock will initially host up to six food trucks at any point in time for lunch and dinner during the week and on Saturdays. Sunday's hours and menu will focus on brunch.

"Think biscuits and beignets washed down with mimosas and house-crafted bloody marys," said Windisch.

The project was encouraged by AltonWorks, an organization formed three years ago with the idea of transforming Downtown Alton. During the pandemic, one of its goals became addressing food scarcity issues.

Alton's interest in food trucks began with a big festival back in 2015 and has grown since.

The whole idea is terrific: A French chef would be kissing his forefinger and thumb and exclaiming, "Magnifique!" about right now.

And these are but two local examples. In Swansea, a mobile cloud kitchen called The Social Kitchen was launched a couple of years ago. It focuses on a variety of food offerings via delivery, pickup, catering,

and food trucks. In goes a step further by working with hospitality entrepreneurs to promote food truck business opportunities.

As a boy, I first saw food trucks at state and county fairs and later in warehouse districts where workers had few other options for grabbing a quick bite. Caterers had a built-in audience. The same applies to such businesses today but with a new level of interest.

Somewhat predictably, recent events helped drive this phenomenon as businesspeople sought ways to stay relevant in a world gone crazy. And these trucks are not fly-by-nights. They must be state inspected. Most of them are family owned. Employees must be certified. Sanitation standards must be met. Food is cooked fresh to order while people are standing there waiting for it.

Operators go through a variety of hurdles, including expense and time involved. The ones that pass muster deserve our support.

National Food Truck Day is celebrated the last Friday of June every year. I'm betting it gets a major salute this year in Southwestern Illinois.

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Immigration can make the metropolitan area great once again

By ALAN J. ORTBALS

St. Louis was once one of the great cities of the United States. In 1900 it was the fourth-largest city in the country with



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more people than Boston. Between 1876 and 1916, it was chosen as the site for five presidential nominating conventions. In 1904 it hosted the World's Fair and was the first American city to hold the modern Olympic games. The Mound City grew like Jack's proverbial beanstalk during the 19th century. The first census after Missouri joined the union, St. Louis's population was just over 10,000. Over the next 30 years it grew tenfold. The city housed 190,000 at the beginning of the Civil War and 351,000 by the end of that decade. At the turn of the century, the population had ballooned to 575,000.

No, this extraordinary growth wasn't due to an unusually fertile population. It was primarily the result of immigration. Before the Civil War most of that immi-

gration came from two countries: Ireland and Germany. The Irish fled their homeland due to the potato famine. Likewise, German peasants emigrated to escape famine and political unrest. By 1850, 43 percent of St. Louisans claimed one of those countries as their place of birth.

After the Civil War, the city's population mushroomed with immigrants coming primarily from eastern and southern Europe. Bohemians (present day Czech Republic) came in search of religious and political freedom. Italians came to America to escape poverty.

The City of St. Louis reached its zenith in 1904 with the World's Fair and Olympic games but already by 1910 it had fallen from fourth largest to sixth. The 20th Century was not a good one for the city and the 21st has been a bane as well. As of 2020, it had fallen to 69th on the population list. It has continued to decline since.

But the city is not alone in population loss. Recent estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau show declining population in St. Louis County, Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair counties as well. And the overall population of the metro area has shrunk in just the last two years. We've dropped out of the top 20 and Charlotte, N.C., and Orlando, Fla., are hot on our heels.

"These numbers tell us what we

expected and underscore the urgency of focusing this metro on growth and more opportunities for all," Greater St. Louis CEO Jason Hall was quoted as saying. "Stagnation is the existential threat to everything we love about the place we call home."

St. Louis Mayor Tishaura Jones has called for investment in affordable housing and neighborhood amenities in an effort to draw people back to a hollowed-out north side.

"These steps are necessary to reverse decades of disinvestment that has led to St. Louisans leaving our city — especially north of Delmar," Jones said in a statement.

While new affordable housing and neighborhood amenities are good, I don't think they'll reverse the decades of population decline and, even if successful, would probably just attract people from within the metro region, rearranging the population, not increasing it. I have another idea. Go back to what made St. Louis great in the first place — immigration.

St. Louis has a tremendous opportunity. Currently, a unique combination of phenomena provides a nexus for revitalization. The city needs to act aggressively to take advantage. Consider the following:

Large swaths of the city have been hollowed out providing read-

ily available space to build the affordable housing Jones has proposed.

Employers are begging for workers. There are more than 11 million job openings nationally — everything from truck drivers to hospitality workers are in demand. Help wanted signs are more plentiful than dandelions in spring.

Just like in the 19th Century, there are millions of refugees on the move. Ukrainians are fleeing the devastation of Putin's war. Afghans are escaping the authoritarianism of the Taliban. Latin Americans are seeking a life free of crime and gang violence.

And the city has a pot full of money — \$500 million in pandemic recovery funds, \$150 million or more from the Rams settlement, federal infrastructure funds are also available. Now is the time.

In the 19th Century, hard-working people who sought a better life, came to America and built St. Louis into one of the nation's great cities. They can do it again. Yes, build new housing and neighborhood amenities, but do everything you can to bring today's refugees to St. Louis to fill them.

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