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## Brick-and-mortar dreams: Transforming a food truck business into a restaurant is a tall order

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Kimberley Haugh knew when it was time to park her four-wheeled food business.

When she and her husband Joshua Haugh first moved to Pittsburgh three years ago, they took Kimberley Ashlee Catering on the road, building out Chop Shop, a salad-focused “mobile kitchen,” and investing more than \$100,000 in a new, customized food truck.

The food truck acted as another revenue stream and a branding instrument for the catering operation. Chop Shop hit the local food truck circuit, serving up gourmet salads at Millvale’s food truck park, pop-up events and festivals, and, before long, an opportunity to establish a full-time restaurant address presented itself at Station Square.

After appearing as a pop-up there, the owner of the complex, then Forest City Enterprises, offered Chop Shop the chance to operate a temporary restaurant in the Freight House Shops, the early success of which Haugh parlayed into Terrene, a fast-casual restaurant that opened in Bessemer Court in Station Square in September.

The Haughs took Chop Shop’s menu, which featured favorites like fried chicken salad and salmon poke, and they bolstered it with a mix of bowls and wraps, catering to a hungry lunch crowd.

In Pennsylvania, in order to obtain a health department permit, food trucks are required to have access to commissary kitchen or a standalone kitchen used for food prep that can be inspected regularly.

For Haugh, the chance to set up a permanent version of Chop Shop met her need for a commissary kitchen. And, more importantly, it was a way to grow.

“We knew that in order to keep our business going and to be able to grow the business, we had to move bricks and mortar,” she said.

It cost about \$100,000 to get Terrene up and running, an investment Haugh is happy with. And so far, the move seems to be a success.



JOE WOJCIK



While Haugh declined to offer revenue numbers for Terrene, she said business has been steady. The once two-person food truck operation now has a staff of seven, and Haugh remains optimistic about the future.

“It’s been going really well,” she said. “We’re really proud of what we’re doing. It was a good move for us.”

Pittsburgh has experienced a full-fledged boom in food trucks, a culinary trend that has crisscrossed the country.

More than 640 food trucks have been granted health permits in the past two years, according to the Allegheny County Health Department.

Food truck operators do evolve into establishing restaurants, just as successful restaurants set up food trucks to bolster their brands and extend their reach to new diners.

Yet local restaurant industry observers note it isn’t easy to roll a food truck into becoming a sit-down restaurant.

“A food truck owner enters the food truck business as a job,” said [Ron Sofranko](#), principal of Wexford-based Sofranko Advisory Services LLC, who has worked as a consultant with restaurants of all kinds. “If you run a food truck, you work it. You make a living. You can make, probably, \$80,000 to \$100,000 a year. But it’s hard work. Adapting that concept to a full-service restaurant is a real challenge. It’s a whole different animal.”

Terri Sokoloff, principal of Specialty Group, said getting together the necessary funds is often the biggest hurdle.

“I have had a few calls from folks with food trucks. The challenge has been the limits of the funds to be able to pull the trigger,” she said. “They want to do it and I believe they’d be great at it, but they just don’t have enough funds. They can’t bring enough (money) to the table.”

Terrene isn’t alone as a restaurant that was developed from a food truck-based operation. The new Fairlane in Mt. Lebanon was launched by a couple who formerly had a food truck. The Pittsburgh Sandwich Society opted to moor itself to a restaurant location that could serve as a resource for its food truck business as well as a second operation when its owners leased out the former Kaleidoscope Cafe in Lawrenceville last year. Franktuary started out in a church kitchen before graduating to a food truck and then a permanent location on Butler Street and after launching out of a truck a few years ago, Redhawk Coffee has since set up shops in Oakland and on Smithfield Street downtown.

For Justin Vetter and Neil Blazin, it took three years, plenty of searching and a Kickstarter campaign that generated \$45,000 to graduate their mobile pizza operation into a permanent restaurant, Driftwood Oven in Lawrenceville.

The two met while working at the restaurant Legume in Oakland, where they began developing their craft of baking bread and came to know many of Pittsburgh’s new craft brewery operators, which offered them their most important venues to find a receptive clientele. As many breweries in the area don’t offer food, which comes to the brewery scene, food trucks have a captive, and often hungry, audience.

Driftwood Oven was started as a mobile wood-fired oven out of which Vetter and Blazin baked their sourdough pizzas, serving them up to craft beer drinkers throughout the region.



They spent three years on their local brewery circuit — Wednesdays at Grist House Craft Brewery in Millvale, Fridays at Dancing Gnome Brewery in Sharpsburg, Sundays at Roundabout Brewery in Lawrenceville — operating at a low cost while maintaining a bigger dream.

“The initial investment is really pretty low,” said Blazin, observing how the nomadic venture allowed for plenty of experimentation and trial and error when you bake for different customers. “The idea behind the mobile oven was to eventually get us into the space we’re in now.”

How low was the initial investment? Blazin said it was less than \$30,000. That included the means in which to pull their trusty wood-fired oven.

“We hooked it up to a 2001 Toyota Tundra that we were the fourth owner of,” Vetter said. “It had everything we needed to haul a two-ton brick oven from place to place.”

In the early months of 2018, they finally had the money to move into a permanent spot. They opened their brick-and-mortar pizza operation in the space that formerly held the restaurant Matteo’s on Butler Street. As it was already built out to be a restaurant, the space was a good fit for Driftwood Oven. Even better for Vetter and Blazin, it didn’t need many of the expensive updates that many new food venues face.

In an effort to expand on what they did well with their mobile outfit, they broadened their menu to include larger pies, salads, soups and some desserts.

Reaching a more affluent clientele out of their permanent location, Driftwood Oven received a major boost in the summer when the national magazine Bon Appetit named it one of the 50 best new restaurants in the U.S.

With the mobile oven stored away for the winter, they’ve now shifted their aspirations to building their brick-and-mortar business, including a new staff of 16 people. An even loftier goal is to grow enough revenue to be able to sponsor health insurance for the staff.

“I think the model that Neil and I followed has certainly worked for us,” Vetter said. “If your goal is to get inside, it’s a hell of a way to get started.”

**Tim Schooley**

Reporter

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