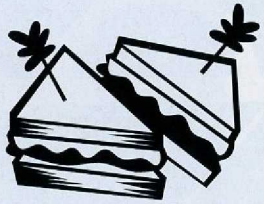
big mouth ON eat street

How Canadian James Cunningham and the hit show Eat St. have helped revolutionize the world of food trucks

BY SARAH B. HOOD
PHOTOS BY CHLOE ELLINGSON



James Cunningham sits relaxed and cheerful while two men dribble relish and mustard over the top of his head. Green and yellow streams ooze down his face. Pickle chunks pool up and collect, then plop onto his shirt front. "This is what they call a 'Food Fight Facial' in Seattle," he quips: it's the kind of off-the-cuff line that one has come to expect from this well-known Canadian comic. Then again, if there actually was such a thing, he'd be the one to know: after all, he's travelled across North America as host of Food Network Canada's *Eat St.*, profiling street food.

Cunningham is apparently willing to pose with — and eat — pretty much anything that's put in front of him. "The only thing I don't like to eat is blue cheese. And cantaloupe. I've eaten a whole chicken," he confesses.

It's all par for the course for a man who's become the poster boy for the world's best sidewalk snacks. "People think it's an American show, but it's 100% Canadian," Cunningham says. *Eat St.* is in fact produced by Vancouver's Paperny Entertainment (also the producer of *Glutton for Punishment* with Bob Blumer). This April, it launches its fourth season on Food Network Canada, airing in back-to-back half-hour segments on Mondays at 11 and 11:30p.m. (Eastern) and 8 and 8:30p.m. (Pacific). It also

airs on the Cooking Channel in the United States, and has been syndicated worldwide. "I think we're in 40 countries now," says Cunningham. "I get email from Brazil and the Philippines."

"*Eat St.* has been a big catalyst in showcasing the developing gourmet food truck scene in North America," says Suresh Doss, founder of the Toronto street-food advocacy group Food Truck Eats. "It's been pivotal in bringing the craze to the general audience, the non-foodies, and writer circles. To this day I'll run into people that have started to look for local food trucks just because of the show. It's certainly helped with the Toronto scene for sure."

This year, *Eat St.* was nominated as Best Lifestyle Program or Series in the inaugural edition of the Canadian Screen Awards. A second nomination, for Best Direction in a Lifestyle/Practical Information Program or Series, went to the show's creator, executive producer, and director, Peter Waal (who's also the creative producer for the popular Vancouver-based series *The Cupcake Girls*.)

Penguin Canada is publishing an *Eat St.* cookbook this spring, authored by Cunningham, which will feature 125 recipes from top food truck chefs. Unsurprisingly, there's also an *Eat St.* iPhone app that allows food truck aficionados to locate and share information about their favourite trucks.

"I know why our show is so popular," Cunningham says. "It's really about the food truck owners. It's not so much even about the food. It's about the entrepreneurial spirit; the people who run food trucks are very savvy entrepreneurs." Of course, there's also a certain allure to the one-upmanship inherent in knowing where to go for the best Lobster Cappuccino on the continent (it's actually a thing), but Cunningham isn't especially interested in competitive epicureanism.

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"The hipster thing can be a bit pretentious, but the majority of food trucks are not at all pretentious," he asserts. "What I despise is when the knowledge of food impedes the whole experience. I just like to eat. Was it coriander? I don't care; did I like it? You have to trust the person serving it."

He's clearly the right man for the job, but how did Cunningham make the move from *Last Comic Standing* and *Just for Laughs* to tracking down purveyors of carrot cake pierogies and pork shoulder doughnuts? "I've been a comic in Canada for about 15 years now, doing Yuk Yuk's and corporate hosting. A few years ago, I auditioned for a TV show, and they narrowed it down to four comics; two were going to get it and two weren't," he says. The series (which Cunningham won't identify) went with two of the other comics. But, as sometimes happens, when one door closes, you get invited to hop a ride on a taco truck.

"Three or four weeks later I got a call saying 'Your audition tape has been making the rounds. We're putting together a pilot for a food show. It's going to be called 'Food in the Fast Lane.' They were going to be shooting

the pilot in Washington, DC and New York." Knowing that the glamorous world of food truck television doesn't sit around and wait for the timid, "I hopped on a Greyhound overnight bus," says Cunningham.

He had one secret weapon at his disposal: "My one superpower in life is I can memorize lines instantly," he says. Despite a night on the bus and minimal preparation, he nailed the audition. "He [director Peter Waal] said 'I'm pretty sold. Why don't we just shoot the pilot right now?' The pilot went to The Food Network, and they said 'We love it!'"

It was soon clear that Waal and Paperny Entertainment deserved an award for cool-hunting, because they were in on the beginning of the North American gourmet food truck revolution. "It seemed to happen spontaneously in so many places at once. Suddenly food trucks were no longer roach coaches; you had all this unique fusion happening. Gourmet quality food at street food prices," Cunningham recalls.

"What I think happened is, in 2008, there was this massive financial crisis and a lot of high-end chefs finding themselves out of work," he explains. "Do you open up a restaurant, or do you start a food truck? You used to think 'fry truck', but people said, 'I'm a five-star chef. I'm not just going to do burgers and fries.' So suddenly they're deep frying kale."

Add to the economic climate the explosion of social media. "Before, a truck would have to park and find a crowd. Now that everyone's got a smartphone and favourite food trucks they're following on Twitter, you'll see a truck pull up and there's already a lineup of forty people. Social media changed the game in a big way," Cunningham says.

"The reason I think it's so trendy is there's no rules. There's all this crazy fusion. Like, I've had Korean barbeque before, but never a Korean barbecue grilled cheese sandwich. Chicken wings stuffed with mac and cheese. Because the trucks are North American, it's a lot of North American comfort food — but in fusion ways. Comfort food is the one buzzword that keeps coming up."

Can you learn about a city's eating habits from its food trucks? "I don't think so. Every city has its own way of doing stuff," Cunningham says, but adds that street food throws norms of regional cuisine out the window. "Some of the best Japanese food I've ever had was at Fukuburger in Las Vegas; some of the best cheesesteaks [a Philadelphia specialty] have been in LA; some of the best Chinese food was in Houston, Texas, at The Rice Box. Some of the best Mexican burritos were in England."

There are pan-North American trends — "A lot of these food trucks are locavores.") There are also clichés — "In LA, every fifth or sixth truck is a taco truck or a burrito truck." However, "a good truck can adapt its menu every day. People have even switched the style. It would be very difficult to find anything that was not represented somewhere in a food truck."

"The explosion of food trucks is insane," he says. "It's not going away anytime soon. There are foodies and there are street foodies. The next big thing is pop-up kitchens, where a pickup truck drops the kitchen [in a temporary public location]."

And Cunningham and Paperny have played a part in the revolution. When the show started, it was following the burgeoning trend. "Now," says Cunningham, "people say we have a food truck because we saw your show."

James Cunningham's 3 CANADIAN FOOD TRUCK RECOMMENDATIONS

Roaming Dragon

WHERE: VANCOUVER TWITTER: @DRAGONTRUCK

Vancouver's first mobile gourmet food truck (launched by buddies Jason Apple and Jory Simkin in 2010) serves up a quirky West Coast-inspired Pan-Asian fusion cuisine that embraces such dishes as Risotto Balls with Curry Mayo and Asian Aioli, Korean Short Rib Tacos, Malaysian Lime Chilli Tofu Grilled Burritos, and Indonesian Beef Rendang Poutine. In 2001, they won a Vancouver magazine Restaurant Award in the newly created "Best Food Truck" category.

El Gastrónomo Vagabundo

WHERE: ST. CATHARINES

TWITTER: @ELGASTRONOMO

Often found serving up tacos and fusion fare amidst the vineyards of Niagara, this food truck is the brainchild of chef Adam Hynam-Smith and his wife Tamara Jensen. They have a strong sustainability mandate, sourcing local ingredients (including from their own garden), using plant-based and biodegradable supplies, and recycling their cooking oils. The truck positively cleaned up at AwesTRUCK 2012, Ontario's first food truck awards, taking home three prizes.

Alley Burger

WHERE: CALGARY TWITTER: @ALLEYBURGER

This truck began as an urban culinary experiment when co-chefs Connie DeSousa and John Jackson of the upscale CHARCUT Roast House decided to see what would happen if they let it be known via social media that they would be selling gourmet burgers in the alley outside the back door. The ensuing foodie stampede inevitably led to the creation of the iconic graffiti-covered truck with its cheerful pig icon.

What makes a great street food city?

Where is the ultimate street food to be found? "Austin. Portland. Los Angeles. New York," says *Eat St.* host James Cunningham. "Let me tell you, the food truck experience in Austin, it is un-freaking-believable. But Canadian trucks, given that there's so few of them, have food that is comparable to the best food trucks in the world. We should be very proud; what we lack in quantity, we make up in quality."

Cunningham is a big booster for his hometown of Toronto. "And my other favourite Canadian city for street food is Vancouver, but it has an unfair advantage — the weather," he says. "The big problem we have here in Toronto is the licences are grandfathered."

In certain respects, Toronto is its own worst enemy when it comes to nurturing mobile food entrepreneurship. Trucks must obtain Refreshment Truck Licences costing about $1,000 for the owner and over $300 each for any other drivers or assistants in the first year of operation alone. In comparison, Vancouver charges a total of about $350 per year to license a truck. Calgary charges $678 — of which $500 is in lieu of taxes — plus $700 for a street vending permit.

In order to park and sell from a permanent position on a public street in Toronto, trucks also need a Designated Vending Area permit. However, the City has declared a moratorium on issuing any new ones in the downtown core. A food truck is allowed to operate on commercially-zoned private property, except a lot that charges a fee for parking, in which case their time is limited to ten minutes per visit — an arrangement that might suit a construction site canteen truck or a soft ice cream vendor, but not a gourmet lunch truck.

"In Portland, they did it right. The Council will go where there's a vacant lot and tell the landlord 'Clean it up or we'll make it a food truck pod,'" says Cunningham. When the City of Portland's Bureau of Planning and the Urban Vitality Group (UVG) undertook a study of how food carts can affect street vitality and neighborhood livability, the resulting report, titled *Food Cartology, Rethinking Urban Spaces as People Places*, found that "food carts have positive impacts on street vitality and neighborhood life in lower density residential neighbourhoods as well as in the high density downtown area."

It recommended that the City should identify more potential food cart locations, help people interested in running food carts to connect with existing support programs (the City of Portland offers a one-stop web page for people looking to start a food truck business), and even "promote innovative urban design elements that support food carts." (Contrast this with the embarrassing non-starter that was Toronto's food cart program À La Cart!)

photos by Stephen Rees (top), Alexa Clark (middle), Calgary Reviews (bottom)

CUNNINGHAM ON FOOD TRUCKS

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Photo by Devin Serink

Edmonton food truck festival

Portland's food cart information site refers readers to a study report called *No Vacancy! A Guide to Creating Temporary Projects in the Central Eastside Industrial District*, which points out that "in times of recession, temporary use of vacant spaces can keep a business district an active and attractive destination. With access to monetary capital severely curtailed, temporary projects can keep undeveloped land from becoming an eyesore while it sits vacant awaiting redevelopment."

Vancouver has been expanding the ranks of its mobile food vendors and recently decreased the minimum required distance between a cart or truck and a bricks-and-mortar restaurant selling similar food. Vancouver's helpful information webpage includes convenient links to application forms and even an app for locating vendors. The City positions its 103 (so far) mobile vendors as part of its strategy to provide residents with healthy, accessible, locally sourced and culturally diverse food choices — as well as "to enliven street life."

Even smaller centres are being creative. "In Hamilton, Ontario they were really smart," says Cunningham. "They opened up this food truck parking area in Gore Park. It's a beautiful park but it was being used by crack dealers. I was there for their one-year anniversary; there were two-hour lineups, families, dogs, and people having picnics. Those food trucks transformed the area for the entire time they were there."

Food trucks are just one component of the project called the Gore Park Summer Promenade, an initiative of the Downtown Hamilton Business Improvement Area. Three days a week through the summer and early fall the park is open not only to food carts, but also to craft vendors and musicians, while the Pedestrianization Pilot Project is upgrading gardens and walkways.

Toronto's mobile food choices are expanding despite short-sighted municipal policies. Still, Cunningham has hope for change. First, he says, "We need more food trucks at the CNE."

— *Sarah B. Hood*