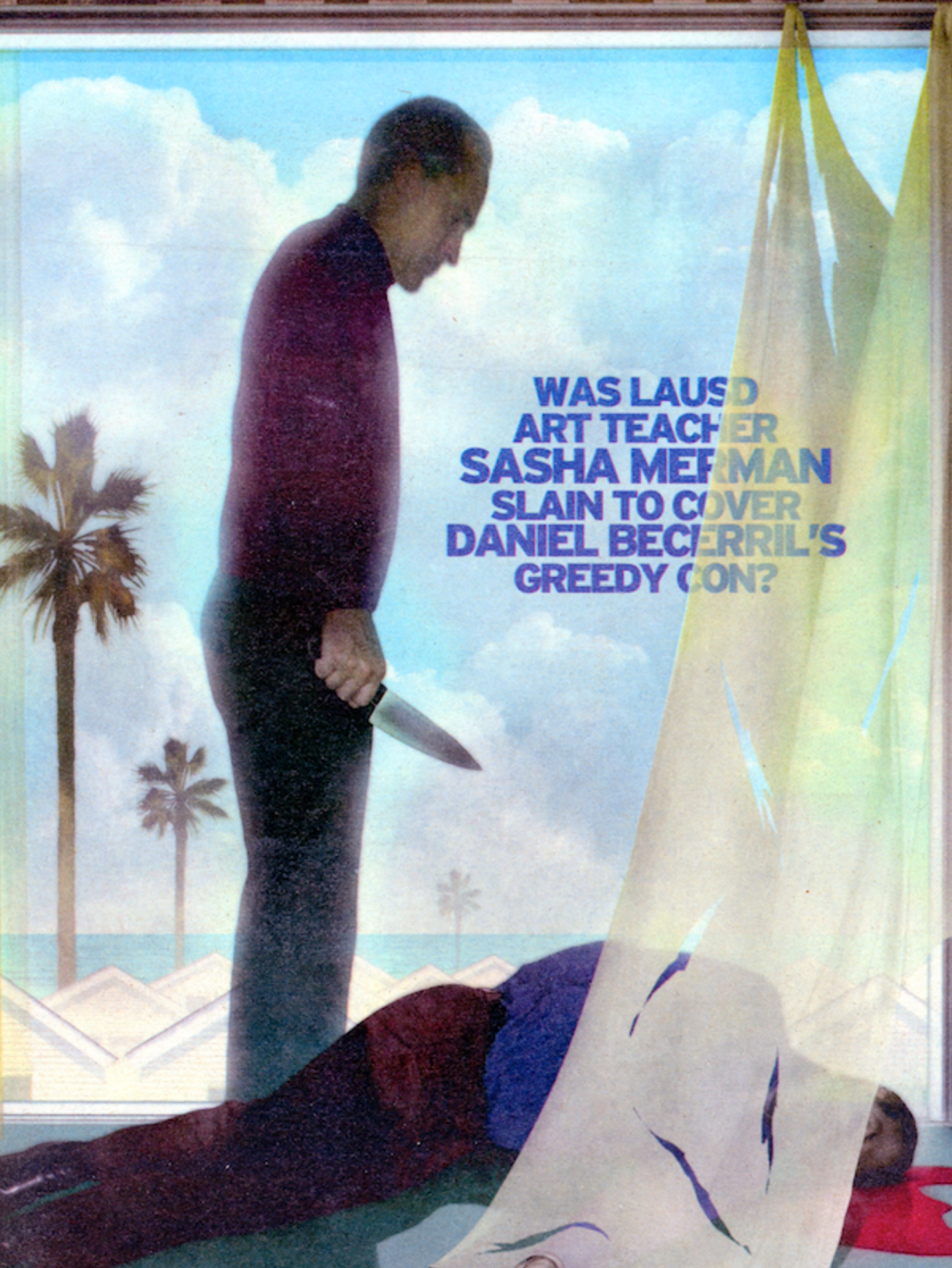


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MURDER ON MONTANA AVENUE

BY TESSA STUART

Taquitos from Prime Time Cuisine on Wheels: Formerly a taco truck, it's now a custom-wrapped "food truck."



PHOTO BY ANNE FISHER

Eats // Tastings //

THE ORIGINAL FOOD TRUCKS

With fancy custom wraps and increased political power, *loncheras* are riding the food truck tidal wave

BY PATRICIA NAZARIO

It's not the kind of question you ask in public, but: Would you eat from a plain white catering truck?

While perusing the menu of a fancy green-and-orange food truck parked near Warner Bros. Studios in Burbank on a recent afternoon, a man in a button-down shirt and slacks pauses, then says, "No."

Another admits, "I don't care. I just want good food!"

Good for him. Because, unbeknownst to either of these customers, until last summer the trendy-looking Prime Time Cuisine on Wheels was a typical taco truck, not a Twitter-hyped "food truck." It served a dozen daily stops at factories and construction sites — the sort of truck that might get called, unfairly, "roach coach."

"You want a-salsa?" Lucy Granados asks with a Spanish accent, as she hands a white food container through the pick-up window to a customer wearing designer sunglasses.

At 47, Granados has been working on food trucks nearly half her life. The Mexican immigrant and her husband, Solomon, bought one for \$30,000 cash 10 years ago. Last summer, they spent \$5,000 more on new tires, engine work and the type of custom wrap that shouts "gourmet."

"Our business was suffering. Most of our customers earned minimum wage and didn't even want to pay \$2 for a taco," Granados says. "We knew wrapping the truck would get us into organized events

and introduce us to a new clientele."

The Los Angeles County Health Department tallies about 6,000 permitted catering trucks. About 200 are gourmet: snazzy vehicles dishing up (mostly) fusion food, with a strong online presence. But the vast majority are run by Mexican or Central American immigrants — native Spanish speakers, disconnected from technology.

In the ocean of catering trucks flooding Los Angeles streets, Prime Time Cuisine on Wheels is a rarity. Few traditional trucks have gone gourmet.

"For some, the digital divide is so strong," says Erin Glenn, CEO of La Asociación de Loncheros. "Just because social media may work for one group doesn't always mean it'll work for another. Just because this is happening doesn't necessarily mean it's better. It's just another form of doing business."

The gourmet food truck business model exploded in 2009. Kogi Korean BBQ pioneer Roy Choi used social media to bring crowds. That appealed to the young and affluent, making taco trucks fashionable in neighborhoods that previously had not tolerated them. Facebook and Twitter became the cookie-cutter tools that savvy entrepreneurs used to connect with next-generation customers. Interest in food trucks went from zero to 60 almost overnight.

"When I came in to consult for La Raza Foods, nobody wanted to rent a catering truck," Rick Restifo says. The veteran truck operator has nearly 40 years of ex-

perience and serves as a business adviser at one of California's largest commissaries, where food trucks are mandated to park overnight.

"The business was dead," Restifo says, "and Kogi just revolutionized it!"

Around the time Kogi started, a Mexican immigrant named Arturo Peña was laid off from his construction job and launched Peña's Tacos.

"Had I known it would be this good," Peña says in Spanish, "I would have done it sooner."

Peña says he sells about 800 tacos a day, no social media required. But the "Kogi effect" makes his white trailer with hand-painted red letters more palatable in Sunland, where he sells. The Latino families that operate taco trucks historically have set up shop in blue-collar Hispanic neighborhoods. But 2010 U.S. Census data show the Sunland-Tujunga population is about 60 percent white.

"I work 12-hour days and take phone orders," says Peña, who pays for space in a private parking lot on Foothill Boulevard. "My customers always know where to find me."

Wearing a beanie chef's hat, red apron and faded jeans, Peña jokes in Spanish with some customers. He uses English to offer kids credit on their way home after school.

Trendy though trucks have become, some municipalities still don't want them. Even Pico Rivera, which has long been predominantly Hispanic, doesn't allow

street food vending.

"If you're looking to have an attractive city," says Pico Rivera City Councilman David Armenta, "you don't want street vending there on your sidewalks or curbs on the street."

The ordinance was passed in the early 1990s, when unwrapped taco trucks roamed the Earth. Back then, people used to complain that some food trucks sold drugs, attracted gangs and lowered property values. These days, complaints generally focus on illegal parking or on trash left by customers.

In recent years, many cities in Los Angeles County have revisited, or even amended, their street food vending regulations. Monrovia requires a special-events permit and limits parking. The Torrance police conduct their own safety inspection of every food truck. And in Beverly Hills, changing attitudes toward street food among the young haven't sparked any new debates: Regulations that have always been on the books still stand. That includes the mandatory police background check for anyone working on a food truck.

Truck owners protest that some of these rules go too far. "To regulate is fine," says Michele Grant, co-owner of the Grilled Cheese Truck. "But some of these statutes hinder our business."

La Asociación de Loncheros, a non-profit advocacy organization that's now 300 members strong, grew out of the 2008 grassroots effort *Carne Asada Is Not a Crime*. Before Angelenos knew about kimchi tacos, L.A. County Supervisor Gloria Molina proposed changes to a peddling ordinance. It would have made it a misdemeanor — punishable by a maximum \$1,000 fine and/or six months in jail — for *loncheras* to violate parking restrictions in certain areas.

In protest, two professors from Occidental College launched *saveourtacotrucks.org* and circulated an online petition that garnered more than 8,000 signatures. Then they penned an open letter to Molina and invited other Angelenos who love taco trucks to do the same. Winning that fight paved the way for Twitter trucks.

And now those trucks are inspiring some *loncheras* to innovate.

"After about three years, some of our members are starting to see benefits of utilizing social media," says Glenn, CEO of the Asociación. "But only a handful of them have expressed interest in it."

The bigger effect might be that the trendier trucks are helping the *loncheras* shed the "roach coach" stereotype — and giving them the freedom to innovate on the food front.

Lucy Granados says she doesn't really get the new technology. But after 20 years aboard a roving kitchen, she knows how to cook. She appointed her daughter-in-law as social media wiz for Prime Time Cuisine on Wheels. That allows Granados to create new items for the menu.

"We've added several high-end items like quesadillas with fish, shrimp and crab," Granados says. "We've always made quality food. Now we can charge more for it."

Award-winning journalist Patricia Nazario started her career as a local TV news reporter and has filed radio stories from South America for NPR, Marketplace and BBC World Service. She's producing *Masa Revolution*, an independent documentary film about the national food truck movement.