



Ethnic street food vendors finally here

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Toronto's new street food vendors: (left to right) Young Jin Kim, Andnet Zere, Bridgette Pinder, Nancy Senawong, Azim Lila, Seemab Ahmad, Suman Roy, Oliver Li, and Brad Long. In the background is Councillor John Filion. (March 17, 2009)

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CITY HALL BUREAU

Just a handful of people have proved willing to negotiate miles of red tape and pay tens of thousands of dollars for the right to sell you cart food more interesting than the lowly hot dog.

Eight vendors finally will be allowed to peddle their ethnic specialties in May, including jerk chicken and pad thai.

It's been a long time coming. Nearly two years have passed since Queen's Park amended regulations to expand the cuisine on Toronto's streets beyond hot dogs and sausages. But actually bringing in the variety of street foods that flavours other cities around the world quickly got mired in red tape in Toronto.

City officials were keen to control the process, citing concerns about food safety, nutrition and preventing conglomerates.

Yesterday, at least one of the successful applicants was cautious about her chances for success.

"This is new. This is expensive," said Bridgette Pinder, who had to borrow money to finance her Caribbean-fusion food cart at Yonge and St. Clair. "It's been very tough. I haven't jumped all the hurdles yet ... I have a good product. You take a chance."

Vendors will have to fork over between \$21,000 and \$28,000 for new carts chosen by the city, plus pay annual location fees ranging from \$5,000 to \$15,000. In return they get near-monopolies at one of eight

locations.

At one point, the city considered borrowing \$700,000 to buy carts and lease them to vendors in an effort to prevent "cart conglomerates" from emerging, but that was quickly shot down as a waste of taxpayer money.

Then the city looked at getting a private foundation to fund the carts, and then there was even talk of a five-year pilot project.

Eventually, the latest model – called "a la Cart" – was set up to place carts in 13 locations across the city.

Though scores of would-be cart owners packed meetings to introduce the program, many were discouraged by the city's stiff requirements.

Only 19 applied to participate, and 12 finalists made it to a taste test with a four-chef judging panel.

In the end, just eight vendors were announced yesterday after a rigorous selection process that included scoring for nutrition, food safety, locally produced food, ethnic diversity, taste and business plan.

Suman Roy, one of the judges, praised all the finalists, saying the food had a home-cooked quality.

"It was more heart to heart ... something a mother or grandmother would make at home. The flavours were there," Roy said.

However, three candidates withdrew when they did not get their pick of a location, which was determined based on overall scores. Another dropped out, citing personal reasons.

It is unclear whether the daunting financial investment was a factor. It's also unclear how easy it will be for the vendors to turn a profit. Menu items will be priced from about \$3 to \$7.

Councillor John Filion, who spearheaded the street food idea, attributed the small number of applicants to uncertainty and the investment required.

"It was a significant financial outlay. I think some people wanted to wait and see how it went."

The pilot will run three years, but officials will assess it this fall to consider expanding it.

The program requires owners to spend at least 70 per cent of the operating time at the cart themselves to ensure they are owner-operated.

Andnet Zere, an immigrant from Eritrea, plans to set up her cart at the Roundhouse Park near the convention centre from 11 a.m. to midnight or even beyond.

"During the summer, I hear people are walking around at 2 or 3 in the morning, and I will accommodate that," said Zere, a registered practical nurse who will cut back her hours at Humber River Regional hospital to work at the cart with her husband, Michael Kifle, selling injera, a type of wrap.

Councillor Karen Stintz says the food cart saga shows how difficult it is to do business with the city.

"Our goal was to provide healthy options," she said. "For the last two years, we have been mired in regulation."

Hot dog vendor Marianne Moroney complained the city has a bias against hot dog vendors, pointing out that existing sellers were shut out of the program.

"They chose to overlook the existing industry completely," said Moroney, executive director of a 100-member association of hot dog vendors.

The city also has plans to allow 15 existing hot dog vendors, for a \$1,000 fee, to offer an expanded menu of healthier foods such as bagels, salads and fresh fruits and vegetables – but that pilot project is

still in the works.