

À LA CART

Get your injera here!

City plans to unveil ethnic street food carts on May long weekend, with Caribbean, Asian and African treats

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March 18, 2009

CITY HALL BUREAU CHIEF

Globe and Mail

Seemab Ahmad, a civil engineer turned cook, is about to take the food of his homeland to the streets of Toronto.

Under a city pilot project finally unveiled yesterday, the 50-year-old Pakistani and seven other chefs from diverse ethnic backgrounds will serve hot dishes from carts in midtown and downtown, beginning in late May.

"It's a great thing for Toronto," says Mr. Ahmad, who owns several fast-food restaurants featuring biryani, kebabs and other specialty dishes from Central Asia. "I have been in the States where every city has beautiful [food] kiosks in the mall ... and here they are empty."

More than two years in the making, the project stalled last year when Mayor David Miller and councillors balked at the initial cost of \$700,000 for a scheme that first imagined a fleet of city-owned carts on the street. Subsequently, council approved the selection of a cart maker, with the cost borne by the street vendor.

Toronto's "à la cart" project aims to showcase the culinary range of a multicultural city.

Souvlaki, jerk chicken and injera (a soft pancake filled with vegetables or meat) will be among items on the menus, as of the May long weekend, if the new carts designed for refrigerated foods are ready.

"We will be introducing Toronto to a new way of thinking about fast food - the polar opposite of burgers and fries delivered through a fast-food window," said board of health chairman John Filion (Ward 23, Willowdale), who hopes the menus will boost tourism.

Prices range from \$1.50 for a spring roll to \$7 for some meat dishes, a cut above a \$3 dog.

"It will be more than hot dogs because it will be real food," said Mr. Filion, the driving force behind the program after the province changed rules in 2007 to widen the definition of street food beyond precooked hot dogs and sausages.

The councillor made no bones about his distaste for the crowd-pleasing hot dog.

"Toronto can come up with a signature food that is a lot more interesting than the hot dog," said Mr. Filion. "I am not knocking hot dog vendors, but I am not a fan of hot dogs."

Existing hot dog vendors could not compete for an ethnic street-food spot unless they gave up their wiener stands. The executive director of the Street Food Vendors Association took offence at what she saw as a city "bias" against her hot dog cart owners.

"We are happy for different foods to be put forward," said Marianne Moroney. But she said the city "chose to overlook the existing industry, which has more than 25 ethnicities in the membership."

After "à la cart" gets off the ground - with vendors subject to the same safety inspections as all food outlets in Toronto - officials hope to give hot dog vendors options to sell soup, fruit and salads.

Many of the new vendors have years of experience in the restaurant and food business, here or in their homelands.

Guyana-born Bridgette Pinder, with Chinese, Indian and African roots, previously worked as a cook at the Fred Victor Centre. Now she plans to work long days - 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. - selling her jerk chicken (soaked in a secret sauce) and mango salad and grilled pineapple with cinnamon sugar from her future location at Yonge and St. Clair.

"My passion is food," she says with a big grin. "This [project] is long overdue on the streets of Toronto."

Despite launching a new business in a recession, with start-up costs of \$30,000 for the cart and other fees, Ms. Pinder seems unfazed. Her enthusiasm is shared by Nancy Senawong, owner and chef of Thai Angel, whose cart will be at Mel Lastman Square.

"If you think in a negative way, nothing will happen," says Ms. Senawong, who came from Bangkok two years ago.

Street eats

Vendors from diverse ethnic backgrounds will soon offer a variety of hot dishes from carts in the city's midtown and downtown areas.

YONGE AND ST. CLAIR

Chef: Bridgette Pinder

Food: Jerk chicken, grilled pineapple

Origin of food: Caribbean/Asian

Prices: \$4

NATHAN PHILLIPS SQUARE (WEST)

Chef: Blair Bonivento

Food: Souvlaki, breakfast sandwiches

Origin of food: Greek

Prices: Unavailable

METRO HALL

Chef: Noorullah Iman

Food: Chapli kabobs, samosas

Origin of food: Afghanistan

Prices: \$5

MEL LASTMAN SQUARE

Chef: Nancy Senawong

Food: Thai barbecue with salad, pad thai

Origin of food: Thai

Prices: \$1.50-\$7

QUEEN'S PARK

Chef: Issa Ashtarieh

Food: Chicken/beef kebab wraps, baklava, yogurt

Origin of food: Middle Eastern

Prices: \$3.75-\$5

YONGE AND EGLINTON

Chef: Young Jin Kim

Food: Bulgogi with seasonal kimchee and tokbukki

Origin of food: Korean

Prices: \$2-\$5

NATHAN PHILLIPS SQUARE (EAST)

Chef: Seemab Ahmad

Food: Biryani and salsa karahi, with pita/chapati/naan/rice

Origin of food: Central Asian/Persian

Prices: \$4-\$6

ROUNDHOUSE PARK

Chef: Andnet Zere

Food: Souvlaki, injera (a soft pancake wrap, vegetarian or lamb or beef)

Origin of food: Eritrean

Prices: \$5