

Alums' Meals on Wheels

By Maya Meinert on May 7, 2010 7:45 AM

If you've spent any time on the north side of University Park campus, you've probably seen them lining the streets around University Village: gourmet food trucks that serve up everything from French crepes to Chinese dim sum.

What you may not know is that some of these businesses were started by USC alumni who have come back to serve meals on wheels to fellow Trojans.

One such truck, **Don Chow Tacos**, was started by alums Dominic Lau '01, MS '05 and Lawrence Lie '01. Their truck, which recently celebrated its first anniversary, was one of the first fusion-food trucks to hit the road shortly after Kogi BBQ, which is considered the pioneer in cross-cultural, designer food trucks.

Don Chow Tacos offers Chinese-Mexican fusion food, a nod to Lau's and Lie's upbringings in Los Angeles' Chinatown and La Canada-Flintridge, respectively.

The owners wanted to provide two of L.A.'s most common ethnic foods with what they call a "Chino-meets-Latino" flair.

True to this idea, diners can order tacos, burritos, tortas and tamales with kung pao chicken, Chinese barbecue pork or soy ginger tofu. On the flip side, chow fun rice noodles can be made with carne asada.

It was tough going for their first weekend in business - Lau and Lie made only \$40.

"We dove in head-first. We wanted to do something fun, but didn't want to give up our days jobs," said Lau, who is working toward an Ed.D at the [USC Rossier School of Education](#) and is director of information technology and operations for the [USC Viterbi School of Engineering's Distance Education Network](#). "We figured we would give it a couple of months, and if it worked out, then it worked out."



Don Chow Tacos owners Dominic Lau, left, and Lawrence Lie with Food Network celebrity Guy Fieri, center

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Despite a slow start, Don Chow Tacos has managed to stay in business amid the 90 or so gourmet food trucks now on the road. The truck has been featured on KNBC-TV's "Food Truck Week" special and on the Food Network show *Diners, Drive-ins and Dives* .

"If you were to ask me a year ago if we'd be this successful, I would have said no way," Lau said. "But I think we have a hit on our hands. We're still having fun, which is the most important thing."



Christian Murcia

Another Trojan having fun with his food truck is Christian Murcia '08, who started **Crepes Bonaparte** catering for his senior project while at the **Lloyd Greif Center for Entrepreneurial Studies** at the **USC Marshall School of Business**. He wanted to start a business that didn't require a lot of start-up money and discovered that catering fit that bill. Murcia didn't have a culinary background, but after having spent some time in France, he had taken up crepe making as a hobby.

"Everyone loves crepes," Murcia said. "Here, you usually see them in restaurants, and they're expensive. In France, they're street food. I wanted our food to be authentic, and that includes the price. Our crepes range from \$2 to \$5."

Those prices are reflected in Murcia's latest offering, which is essentially a creperie in truck form. While he originally wanted to turn his catering business into a brick-and-mortar restaurant, Murcia realized that a food truck would be more cost effective since it requires fewer overhead expenses. He launched the truck in March and does most of his business in his native Orange County, although he makes a dedicated stop at USC once a week.

Some of his most popular dishes include the Caprese filled with chicken, mozzarella, tomato and pesto, and the Spicy Apple Bottoms stuffed with cooked cinnamon apples, caramel and whipped cream.

"I've always wanted to own my own business," Murcia said. "It's a lot of work, but I enjoy it because I get to make my own decisions. And I love starting something and seeing it grow."

Another truck often seen at USC is the **Dim Sum Truck**, which got its start when owner Alex Chu '09 decided it was time to start his own food business.

Having worked in the dining industry for years - including business management internships at Hollywood's trendy Kitchen 24 and upscale BLT Steak in West Hollywood - Chu knew he would work in the restaurant industry and eventually open his own eatery.



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Bolstered by his minor in entrepreneurship, Chu decided to go for it and launched the truck in February.



Alex Chu

“I had worked as a dim sum server at an Asian fusion restaurant. That experience really helped in starting the Dim Sum Truck because I got to know what other people like and not just what me or my family like,” said Chu, an international relations major at **USC College**. “I’m also the type of person who will take a risk and learn while doing. I like interacting with customers and meeting new people. It’s nice to see the regulars!”

Chu also likes bringing the truck to USC for lunch because he has a built-in fan base. “My brother is a sophomore, and he brings his friends. And my friends bring their friends. I also use Facebook to promote specials,” he said. Even the truck’s cashier is a USC student.

Some of the traditional dim sum items the truck serves are shu mai and har gow dumplings, barbecue pork buns, egg custard tarts and chicken feet. There are also fusion items such as Peking duck tacos.

Putting his degree to good use, Chu is working on opening a second truck in the near future.

To find the location of these trucks, follow them on Twitter at [@donchowitzacos](#), [@crepesbonaparte](#) and [@dimsumtruck](#).