



The Food Trailer Business

Half the cost of a food truck, none of the engine trouble, and a menu small enough to print money. The honest path into mobile food, permits and all.

\$25,000-40,000

START LEAN

60-90 days

FIRST DOLLAR

15-25% net

TYPICAL MARGIN

Is this your business?

A food trailer is the working-class genius move of the mobile food world: \$25,000-60,000 all-in for a used, equipped rig versus \$75,000-150,000 for a truck, with no drivetrain to break down on event morning. The food is the easy part. The business is permits, commissary logistics, a five-item menu engineered for speed, and knowing that breweries and booked events beat street corners almost every time.

\$25,000-40,000

LEAN STARTUP COST

\$50,000-75,000

STANDARD BUILD

60-90 days

TIME TO FIRST DOLLAR

15-25% net

TYPICAL GROSS MARGIN

Possible; 2 is the real minimum

SOLO-FRIENDLY

No (commissary required)

HOME-BASED

BUILT FOR THESE FOUNDER TYPES

THE CRAFTSMAN

THE OPERATOR

5/5 difficulty

THE HONEST FIT TEST

This is the heaviest lift in this series: real capital, real regulation, and 12-hour days that start with prep and end with degreasing. You need stamina, a dish people crave, and genuine patience for health-department process. If feeding a 40-person line at a brewery while your fryer timer screams sounds like your kind of chaos, welcome. If not, read the coffee cart playbook instead.

Who pays, and why now.

Mobile food won its cultural war years ago: festivals, breweries, office parks, and weddings now treat a great trailer as a feature, not a fallback. The customer pays \$12-18 for a craveable, photogenic meal they cannot get at a drive-through, and the operator skips the \$250,000 buildout and ten-year lease that crush most first restaurants. The trailer is the lowest-risk way to find out if strangers will pay for your food, at a price that is merely serious instead of ruinous.

The trailer-versus-truck decision is the first insider fork, and the trailer usually wins. A used, health-code-equipped trailer lands at \$25,000-60,000 all-in against \$75,000-150,000 for a comparable truck, and a trailer has no engine: nothing to break down on event morning, no second vehicle to insure like a commercial chassis, and if your tow vehicle dies you rent another one by noon. Trucks win only where daily multi-stop street service is the whole model. For an events-first business, the trailer is simply better capital allocation.

The second fork is where you park, and the answer has changed: events and breweries beat street spots. A daily street location means grinding for \$400-800 days, fighting for parking, and praying on weather. A brewery without a kitchen will hand you a recurring Friday night in front of 150 drinking customers who must eat, often for free or a small percentage, because you solve their food problem. Booked events and festivals do \$1,200-3,000 days, and private catering buyouts are better still. The calendar, not the corner, is the business.

The menu is the third fork: five to seven items off a shared prep base, built for a three-minute ticket time. Every item you add slows the line, complicates inventory, and adds waste; the best trailers in America sell essentially one thing with variations and a cult following. Food cost discipline (28-35%) plus a tight menu is what separates the trailers that net \$5,000 a month from the ones that gross big and keep nothing.

WHO BUYS	WHAT THEY PAY	WHAT THEY ACTUALLY WANT
Breweries + taprooms	Free spot or 0-15% of sales; your full register	Food for drinking customers without building a kitchen; reliability above all
Festival + event crowds	\$12-18 average ticket; fees of \$200-1,500 to organizers	Fast, craveable, walkable food worth posting
Private event hosts	\$1,500-3,500 catering buyouts	Weddings, graduations, and company parties fed with zero host effort
Corporate campuses + office parks	Scheduled lunch service, \$600-1,200 days	A rotating lunch amenity that makes the office feel less like one

WHAT THE TRAILER SAVES VS A TRUCK

\$50,000+

A capable used trailer runs \$25,000-60,000 all-in against \$75,000-150,000 for a truck, and the trailer never needs a transmission. The savings buy your first year of mistakes, and in this trade everyone pays for a first year of mistakes: the trailer founder just pays half price.

Every dollar, before you spend it.

These are real numbers for a used-trailer launch, and the spread depends almost entirely on the rig you find and the county you serve. Inspect any used trailer with your health department's checklist in hand: a \$20,000 trailer that cannot pass inspection is a \$20,000 shed.

THE LEAN BUILD · START HERE	WHY IT EARNS ITS PLACE	COST
Used equipped trailer (14-18 ft)	Hood, three-compartment sink, handwash sink, water tanks, NSF surfaces. Verify against YOUR county's checklist before paying	\$18,000-32,000
Fire suppression system, tagged and current	Required over fryers and grills nearly everywhere; recertification runs \$150-400 if the system exists	\$400-3,000
Generator (quiet inverter class) + propane setup	Undersized power is the most common first-event failure; size it to your equipment sheet	\$1,200-3,500
Permits, plan review, licenses (county + city)	Health permit, plan review fees, mobile vendor license, food manager cert. See legal	\$500-2,000
Commissary agreement (first 3 months)	Required home base in most counties: prep, water, waste, storage	\$1,200-2,400
Insurance down payment (GL + trailer + auto)	\$1M general liability minimum; events will demand COIs	\$400-900
POS, menu signage, smallwares, first inventory	Tablets, cash drawer, boards, pans, and your opening food order	\$1,500-3,000
Tow vehicle capability	If your current vehicle can tow 5,000-7,000 lbs, this is \$0; budget honestly if not	\$0-8,000
Lean total		\$23,200-54,800 all-in

THE STANDARD BUILD · ADD AFTER FIRST REVENUE	WHAT IT UNLOCKS	COST
Professional wrap + lighting	The trailer is your billboard at every event; ugly rigs earn less, measurably	\$2,500-6,000
New custom-built trailer instead of used	Built to your county's code from day one; 4-6 month lead times are normal	\$40,000-80,000
Refrigerated prep capacity upgrade	More cold storage means bigger events without mid-shift restocks	\$1,500-4,000
Online ordering + loyalty stack	Pre-orders flatten the line at lunch service and feed your event email list	\$30-80/mo

THE RULE

Buy the rig with your county's checklist, not your dreams. Every dollar of custom buildout you skip in year one is a dollar of runway, and runway, not equipment, is what kills trailers: most that fail die in month eight with a beautiful rig and an empty calendar. Used, compliant, and booked beats custom, gorgeous, and idle.

Clean from day one.

Mobile food is the most regulated business in this series, and the regulation is local: two neighboring counties can want entirely different trailers. The sequence that saves you months: call your health department FIRST, get their mobile-unit checklist, and only then shop for a trailer. Operators who buy first routinely pay twice.

- Call the health department before buying anything:** Ask for the mobile food unit requirements and plan-review packet. Most counties require plan review BEFORE you buy or build, and their checklist (sink count, hood specs, tank sizes, surface materials) is the spec sheet your trailer must match. This one phone call is worth thousands.

- Form your LLC:** File in your home state, get the EIN free at irs.gov, open the business bank account. THE LAUNCHPAD Module Three walks every step.

- County health permit + inspections:** Plan review, pre-operational inspection, then ongoing surprise inspections, exactly like a restaurant. Budget \$300-1,000 annually depending on county, and expect to be inspected at festivals too: event organizers coordinate with the health department.

- Commissary agreement:** Most counties require a licensed commissary as your home base: overnight parking, potable water fill, gray-water dump, cold storage, and prep space. \$300-800 a month. Shared commercial kitchens, restaurants with spare capacity, and dedicated commissaries all work; get the signed agreement the health department requires.

- Food manager + handler certifications:** At least one certified food protection manager (ServSafe Manager or equivalent, roughly \$150) and handler cards for everyone working the window. Keep copies in the trailer; inspectors ask.

- Fire suppression + propane compliance:** Cooking under a hood with fryers or grills requires a tagged, professionally serviced suppression system (typically every 6 months) and proper propane mounting, lines, and leak testing. The fire marshal is a separate inspection from health in many jurisdictions, and festivals check the tag.

- Mobile vendor license + zoning:** The city license to vend, plus the zoning map of where you legally can: distance rules from restaurants, time limits, private-lot permissions. Every city differs; the brewery's parking lot usually needs only the brewery's blessing, which is one more reason breweries beat streets.

- Event permits + COIs on file:** Festivals and city events require temporary event permits (sometimes per event, \$25-150) and certificates of insurance naming the organizer. A broker who issues same-day COIs is an operational requirement, not a luxury.

INSURANCE, SPECIFICALLY

Stack of four: general liability at \$1M (every venue demands it), the trailer itself (inland marine or a trailer policy), commercial auto on the tow vehicle while towing, and workers' comp the moment anyone works the window for pay. Product liability for foodborne claims rides inside most GL policies built for food service; confirm it explicitly. Expect \$250-500 a month all-in.

WATCH FOR

The county-line trap. Your permit is county-issued, and the festival forty minutes away may sit in a county that wants its own permit, its own inspection, and occasionally its own plumbing opinion. Multi-county operators keep a folder per county and build permit costs into event pricing. Confirm jurisdiction before signing any event contract, not after.

Requirements vary by state and city. Verify with your state, city clerk, and a licensed professional. Education, not legal advice.

Three doors. Real numbers.

Price for a 28-35% food cost and a three-minute ticket, then sell your calendar three ways: the daily window, the recurring residency, and the private buyout. The same kitchen earns very differently depending on which of these fills your week, so treat the mix as your real pricing decision.

	RECOMMEND	
<p>DOOR ONE</p> <p>The Window</p> <p>\$12-18 average ticket</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ 5-7 item menu off one prep base ◆ Three-minute ticket times at full line ◆ Card-first POS with tap to pay ◆ Combo pricing engineered to lift average ticket 	<p>DOOR TWO</p> <p>The Residency</p> <p>\$900-1,800 per service night, most-booked</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Recurring weekly slot at a brewery or taproom ◆ You keep the register; host gets fed customers ◆ Menu co-promoted to the host's audience ◆ Guaranteed minimum negotiable on slow nights ◆ The bankable backbone of the whole calendar 	<p>DOOR THREE</p> <p>The Buyout</p> <p>\$1,800-3,500 private events</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Weddings, graduations, corporate parties ◆ Flat fee for a guest-count guarantee, 50% deposit ◆ Custom short menu from your core prep ◆ Travel and staffing built into the quote ◆ Highest margin day this business produces

PRICING NOTES FOR THIS BUSINESS

- Hold food cost at 28-35% by costing every item per portion, quarterly. A \$14 item should carry \$4-5 of ingredients, and shrink counts.
- Festival fees (\$200-1,500 plus sometimes a percentage) come off YOUR margin: demand real attendance history, not the organizer's adjectives, before signing.
- Buyouts price per head (\$18-28) with a minimum guarantee and a signed contract; deposits are non-refundable inside 14 days.
- Weather is a P&L line: build a 10-15% rainy-day reserve into your monthly math, because two rained-out weekends a season is normal, not bad luck.
- Raise prices with the supplier invoice, not with apology. A 50-cent move on your top seller is invisible to the line and decisive to your margin.

THE UPSSELL THAT PAYS THE RENT

The catering funnel hiding in every service. Each brewery night and festival window feeds people who plan weddings, run offices, and throw graduation parties. Put a 'book the trailer' QR on the window, the menu board, and the receipt, and collect emails with every loyalty punch. The trailers that thrive convert their lines into buyouts; the window is the marketing, the buyout is the margin.

Names, not strategies.

Your first ten services should be booked before the trailer passes final inspection. Mobile food is a calendar business, and an empty week costs you insurance, commissary rent, and momentum whether you cook or not. Sell the calendar first.

1 **Breweries without kitchens, all of them**

List every taproom within 30 minutes and pitch a recurring night, not a one-off: 'I'm your Friday food, every Friday.' Bring samples and your COI. One yes is a bankable \$1,000+ night, fifty times a year.

2 **The established trailer network**

Operators get more event invitations than they can serve and pass overflow to rigs they respect. Show up at events, buy their food, be useful, and join the local mobile-food association. This industry refers constantly, but only people it has met.

3 **Event organizers and festival circuits**

Applications for spring festivals close in winter: get on every organizer's vendor list now. Start with smaller community events where a new rig can win a corner, and collect attendance data for your own future vetting.

4 **Office parks and corporate campuses**

Facilities and HR managers book rotating lunch vendors and food-truck-Friday programs. A one-page menu and a tight 11:30-1:00 service plan is the whole pitch; reliability gets you the recurring slot.

5 **Your launch event, engineered**

Open at a brewery with a built-in crowd rather than a lonely curb: co-promote for two weeks, run a short menu, and let the line photograph itself. A packed opening night posted everywhere books the next month for you.

6 **Private-event marketplaces**

Catering platforms and wedding directories list food trailers now, and 'food trailer wedding' searches are rising every year. Claim profiles early; even two leads a season pays the listing fee many times over.

THE EXACT ASK

"Hi [name], I'm [name], I run [trailer name], we do [signature item] out of a fully permitted rig here in [city]. I noticed your taproom doesn't have a kitchen, and your Friday crowd is exactly who we feed best. I'd love to take a standing Friday night: you get fed, happy customers who stay for another round, I bring the COI, the health permit, and zero work for your staff. Could I bring samples by this week and talk dates?"

THE FOUNDING-CUSTOMER DEAL

For your first month of brewery nights: no percentage to the host and a free staff meal each service, in exchange for co-promotion to their list and a standing slot review at week four. For your first two private buyouts: \$300 off in exchange for full photo rights and a detailed review. You are buying proof and calendar momentum, the two assets this business runs on.

Owned, earned, then paid.

Mobile food marketing has one unbreakable rule: people cannot buy from a trailer they cannot find. Your engine is a religiously updated location schedule, food photography that travels, and host partners who promote you because your presence makes them money.

CHANNEL, RANKED	WHY IT WORKS HERE	THE FIRST MOVE
Instagram + TikTok with a pinned schedule	The find-the-trailer behavior lives here; the schedule post is your storefront	Weekly schedule graphic every Sunday, stories from every service, one drool-shot reel per week
Google Business Profile	'Food trailer near me' and your cuisine searches convert at lunch decision time	Claim it day one, keep hours synced to the schedule, load it with food photos and reviews
Host co-promotion	Every brewery night puts you in front of the host's entire audience, free	Send hosts ready-to-post graphics and a menu; tag-team every event announcement
Email + SMS list	The algorithm owes you nothing; your list shows up in the rain	QR at the window with a loyalty hook; weekly where-we-are blast every Thursday
Local food media + influencers	One credible local food account's visit fills a weekend	Invite three local food reviewers to opening month with a comped tasting; never pay for praise

FIVE CONTENT PIECES THAT WIN THIS NICHE

- The build: turning an empty trailer into a kitchen, in 90 seconds
- What \$14 gets you here vs the drive-through (portion honesty post)
- Where we are this week: the schedule reel that trains your followers
- One item, three days of prep: why the line moves so fast
- Rained out: the honest economics of a weather day in mobile food

THE REVIEW MACHINE

Ask at the window during the compliment: 'That means a lot, we're new, would you drop that in a Google review while you eat? It's two taps.' QR on the pickup counter, on the napkin holder, on the receipt. Mobile food buyers check reviews from the festival line itself, and fifty reviews with food photos outranks every established competitor who never asks.

One unit, one month, no fog.

Two honest snapshots: one brewery service night, and a strong 14-service month in season. Note what is NOT here: winter months at half volume, rained-out weekends, and repair surprises. The annual picture in mobile food is the monthly picture with humility applied.

ONE UNIT: ONE BREWERY NIGHT (85 ORDERS, \$15 AVG)	AMOUNT
Revenue	\$1,275
Food cost (30%)	-\$383
Propane, fuel, ice, commissary share	-\$105
Window helper (5 hrs)	-\$80
Card processing (2.9%)	-\$37
Gross profit (10-hr day with prep)	\$670
Tax reserve (27%)	-\$181
Yours, per service	\$489

A WORKING MONTH: 14 SERVICES, PEAK SEASON (MIXED NIGHTS, 1 BUYOUT)	AMOUNT
Revenue	\$16,800
Food cost (30%)	-\$5,040
Labor (window help)	-\$1,400
Event fees, commissary, propane, fuel	-\$1,870
Insurance, permits, processing	-\$770
Trailer payment or equipment fund	-\$650
Pre-tax profit	\$7,070
Tax reserve (27%)	-\$1,909
Owner take-home	\$5,161

BREAK-EVEN

8-14 months

A \$30,000-45,000 launch against \$3,500-5,500 of monthly owner profit in season, minus thin winter months, puts honest payback at eight to fourteen months. That is excellent for food service, where a restaurant buildout takes years to return, but it demands the thing trailers skip most: a full calendar, sold in advance, every single month.

Illustrative figures at typical market rates; your market, prices, and costs will differ. Run YOUR numbers in the One-Page P&L from THE LAUNCHPAD, Module Six. Remember the 25-30% tax reserve on every dollar of profit.

Pre-decided, so motivation is never consulted.

WEEK ONE: FOUNDATIONS

- Health department called; mobile-unit checklist in hand
- LLC filed, EIN issued, business bank account open
- Trailer search started against the county checklist
- Commissary candidates toured; terms compared
- Menu drafted: 5-7 items, one prep base, costed per portion

WEEK TWO: DOORS OPEN

- Trailer purchased after checklist + fire-system inspection
- Plan review submitted; permits and licenses filed
- Insurance bound; same-day COI broker confirmed
- Food manager certification completed
- Brewery pitch list built; first samples scheduled

WEEK THREE: MOMENTUM

- Pre-operational health inspection scheduled or passed
- Two residency conversations live; one night committed
- POS, menus, signage, and pricing finalized
- Friends-and-family test service run at the commissary
- Social accounts live with build content posting

WEEK FOUR: THE SYSTEM

- Launch night at a host venue, co-promoted for 2 weeks
- Weekly schedule cadence started (Sunday post, Thursday blast)
- First buyout inquiry pipeline opened (QR everywhere)
- Month-one P&L done; food cost checked against the 30% line
- Festival applications submitted for next season

DAY 30 VERDICT

Green light: permits passed, one recurring residency committed, launch service sold through prep, and a second month half-booked. Yellow: permitted and launched but the calendar is one-offs: you are event-hopping instead of residency-building; spend week five exclusively on brewery pitches. Red: trailer bought but permits stalled or failing inspection: stop all marketing spend and fix compliance first, because nothing else exists until the permit does.

How this business fails, and how it grows.

THE FIVE KILLERS

- ✗ **Buying the trailer before calling the health department**

The most expensive mistake in mobile food: a rig that fails your county's sink, hood, or tank specs needs a retrofit that can cost more than the trailer did. The checklist call is free. Make it first.

- ✗ **A menu that does too much**

Twelve items means slow tickets, blown food cost, and prep that never ends. Five to seven items, one prep base, three-minute service. The line length at 7 p.m. is set by the menu you wrote in month one.

- ✗ **Chasing street spots over hosts and events**

The romantic curbside grind delivers \$400 days, parking wars, and weather roulette while breweries hand out \$1,200 nights to whoever asks professionally. Build the residency calendar first; flirt with corners later.

- ✗ **Trusting festival attendance claims**

Organizers sell booths with optimistic math, and a \$900 fee against a 300-person 'festival' is a donation. Demand prior-year vendor numbers, talk to last year's trailers, and walk away freely. Your fee is rent: act like a tenant who reads leases.

- ✗ **No winter plan**

Mobile food revenue can halve from November to February while insurance, commissary, and payments march on. Bank a reserve in season, chase indoor and corporate catering, and pre-sell spring events in January, or watch the season's profit drain by March.

THREE SCALE PATHS

- 1 **The second rig**

A duplicate trailer with a trained two-person crew runs the events you decline, doubling capacity on the same commissary, menu, and brand. Trailers replicate far cheaper than trucks, which is the quiet long-game reason you chose one.

- 2 **Catering-first evolution**

Shift the mix toward buyouts and corporate drops until events are most of revenue: higher margins, guaranteed counts, deposits in advance, and a calendar you control. Many of the best trailer businesses quietly become catering companies wearing a trailer.

- 3 **Bricks, chosen carefully**

A trailer with a cult following can graduate into a food-hall stall or small counter-service spot with the menu, the following, and the systems already proven. The trailer then becomes the marketing arm and event engine of a restaurant that skipped the risky guessing phase.

YOUR FIRST HIRE

A window-and-prep teammate before you think you can afford one, because solo service caps your line speed and your sanity at about 40 orders. Train them on the closing checklist and the three busiest menu items first. They are also your proof of system: if ticket times hold when you step off the line for twenty minutes, you have a business that can someday run a second rig.

THE STAIRCASE CONTINUES

The playbook is the map. The machine is waiting.

Everything this playbook describes, Epic Advisory Group can build with you: the brand, the cinematic website, the entity, the engine. Describe your idea to the Launch Engine and see your business real in about sixty seconds, free.

- The Launch Engine: your idea, built free, in about a minute
- THE ASCENT: Founder Edition: the eight-module course
- Launch-in-a-Box: entity, brand, site, and first campaign, one flat price
- Growth, capital readiness, and the path to the public markets

"There is no right age. There is only the decision."



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