

# Sampling Our Way Through Portland, Oregon's Food Carts

By Jan Ross

Sampling from the array of choices

**A**s huge fans of local foodie tours, my husband and I will often make a foodie tour of a city our first priority when visiting. It gives us a chance to sample some local restaurants and make a decision about whether or not we would like to return to enjoy a full meal. In this manner, we have explored Seattle, Scottsdale, San Francisco and lots of other locations.

But truly one of the most unique foodie tours was one we participated in just recently in Portland, Oregon,

given by Food Carts Portland. Long before food carts or trucks became a phenomenon spreading throughout most major cities, Portland started the popular craze that other cities are now trying to emulate. Always a place on the cutting edge of culinary daring, Portland is the perfect place to check out the food cart scene.

For the uninitiated, food carts are basically just mobile kitchens from which food is served to pedestrians passing by. While food carts are technically mobile, those in Portland are stationary, set up into pods all

over the city. Food carts are versatile, offering an array of goodies, and appealing to a variety of customers, from businessmen on a lunch break to families of all ages to students.

Food carts are often creative in design as well as in the food they offer but it's pretty easy to tell which are the most popular carts – just follow the lines! But how did Portland become what is arguably the food cart capitol of the United States? Most of this is due to Portland's cart-friendly regulations. Not much red tape, reasonable

start-up costs for entrepreneur chefs and a very supportive community all add up to the perfect food cart venue. In addition, Portland is a very walkable city with a culture that fosters creativity and craftsmanship so it's no surprise that the food carts have flourished and had a huge impact on the city.

Empty lots and parking lots have filled with food cart pods and the influence in the surrounding areas can be seen when you stop for a bite. Local parks have turned from places you would not want to walk through





Brett, a tall, bespectacled, gregarious individual with unique mutton chops, has been talking and writing about Portland's food carts since 2008. His tours cover not only the history of the carts, but also the conditions which helped them grow and thrive. Of course, the tour includes tasty samples.

Along with about 15 other people, we met Brett in a parking lot filled with a dizzying array of food carts. Everything from gyros to dumplings to pizza to luscious items we could not even identify were being consumed, and the delicious smells wafting about were enough to make anyone abandon any idea of diet plans. Brett introduced himself and began telling us about the food carts, which was extremely interesting but in reality, we were probably all thinking the same thing: Bring on the food!

Finally, after walking around for several minutes and showing the amazing choices, Brett began offering us food. And what food! This was not the hot dogs/funnel cake/barbecued sandwiches we were used to at special events in our home city; this was delicious, unique, amazing, and please can we have more?

We visited several different food cart pods on our tour, strolling from one to the other and enjoying the beautiful city of Portland and the friendly residents. We chowed down on items from a number of carts and a number of countries, including taco, pizza, and gyros but a couple were absolute standouts.

The Dump Truck is a bright yellow food cart owned by Julia and Reid who discovered the joy of dumplings when they lived in Beijing in 2007. Taught the secret to making perfect dumplings, they came to Portland



The Dump Truck food cart

ABOVE-LEFT Brett Burmeister, our affable host



So many choices - and not enough time!

to family-friendly locations and small shops and restaurants have sprung up in the nearby neighborhoods.

The astonishing variety of delectable selections can be a little overwhelming - where to start? Our foodie tour with Food Carts Portland would help us learn more about this trend and sample some of the most popular offerings. With over 600 food carts offering food from all over the world, it helps to have an expert along, and Brett Burmeister, the owner and managing editor of Food Carts Portland, is just the guy.



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Just a few of the Portland Food Carts

RIGHT  
Our group sampling the waffles

where they made them for friends, one of whom was the owner of a local restaurant who added the dumplings to his menu. Julia experimented with a variety of crazy but delicious dumplings which were so popular that the couple decided to open a food cart to bring their offerings to the masses.

We tried several different dumplings but our favorite by far was the cheeseburger dumpling – that’s right, a uniquely American concoction plunked into an Asian filling and it absolutely works.

Waffles are one of my favorite things in the entire world, so when we

stopped at The Gaufre Gourmet food cart, my salivary glands were vibrant with expectation. That expectation was met with the glory that is their delicious waffles. Gaufre is French for waffle and Charlene Wesler’s love for gourmet cuisine is evident in the name she chose for her business. Together with fellow chef Michael

Susak, Charlene offers a mouthwatering selection of toppings for her liege style waffles, which are truly unique. These are not your typical waffles; rather they are made from a sweet, brioche-style dough with chunks of pearl sugar kneaded into the dough right before baking. This dough gives the waffles a chewy texture, and the added sugar gives them a sweet, caramelized taste.

The toppings are also chosen with care and made with only fresh, local, organic and seasonal ingredients. For a great introduction and to fully appreciate how delicious these waffles are on their own, try the original liege waffle simply dusted with powdered sugar. That’s what we had for a sample, but I looked so yearningly at the other menu offerings that my husband took pity on me and we walked back over to The Gaufre Gourmet for breakfast the next morning. I had the Belgian chocolate drizzled waffle, which I highly recommend. I could cheerfully eat there every single day until I had tried every waffle – then start again!

The Food Carts Portland tour was the perfect introduction to the fascinating world of food carts in Portland and we highly recommend it. Luckily it was our first day in Portland, so we were able to check out a variety of food carts for other meals during our stay. We never visited a single restaurant during our stay, as we were able to satisfy every craving with a food cart item. The next time you are in Portland, check out the Food Carts Portland tour -- and try some of those waffles for me!

