

A Glossary for Aspiring Food Truck Owners

The Must-Know Terms for Food Truck Owners, Pop-Up Pros & Plate-Sellers Going Legit



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Ever sat in a meeting, workshop, or scroll through a mobile food forum thinking, “Wait... what’s a commissary again?”

You’re not alone. The mobile food industry has its own language –and if you’re trying to go **from hobbyist to licensed foodpreneur**, it can feel like everyone else knows what they’re doing (they don’t). This glossary is here to fix that.

Whether you’re dreaming of your first truck or running pop-ups on weekends, you deserve to feel confident, credible, and clear on the basics. Let’s break it down.



Startup & Structure

Commissary Kitchen

A licensed, inspected kitchen where mobile vendors prep food, store equipment, and dump waste. (Spoiler: you probably need one to get legal.)

Mobile Food Unit (MFU)

The technical term for your food truck, trailer, cart, or vehicle. Health inspectors and application forms love this phrase.

Vendor License

Your permission slip from the city/county to sell food. Sometimes called a peddler's permit. Often confused with your business license (they're different).

Fire Inspection

Required for any mobile unit with propane, fryers, grills, or gas equipment. Pro Tip: This usually comes after your health inspection is scheduled.



Operations & Equipment

Service Window

Where the magic (and the money) happens. Also where your cashier, runner, or order taker posts up. Keep it clean and labeled.

Generator

Provides power when you're not plugged in. Pro Tip: Quiet ones make friends. Loud ones make complaints.

Gray Water Tank

Collects waste water from your sinks. Must be emptied at approved locations—no street draining allowed.

Prep Time

The total time it takes to set up and be ready to serve. Important for event planning and time management.



Menu & Money

COGS (Cost of Goods Sold)

What it costs you to make your product (food, packaging, utensils). Lower is better—but not at the expense of quality.

POS (Point of Sale)

Your checkout system (like Square or Clover). It tracks sales, tips, taxes—and makes reporting easier come tax time.

Ticket Time

How long it takes to serve one order. Pro Tip: This is one of the most important numbers event planners want to know.

Upsell

Offering an extra item, combo, or add-on (like drinks, sides, merch) to boost your average ticket. Train your team well.



Events & Locations

Pop-Up

A temporary setup (tent or trailer) at an event or private booking. Can be legal or under-the-table—know the difference.

Park & Sell

Finding a location and selling directly to the public. Often requires zoning approval and permission from the property owner.

Catering Gig

A prepaid booking for a set number of guests. Often more profitable than vending—and easier to plan for.

Food Truck Rally

Multiple trucks in one spot. These events can attract hundreds of people... or none. Ask for estimated foot traffic, marketing plan, and vendor cap before committing.



Health & Safety

NSF Certified

Means your equipment meets sanitation standards. Most health departments require it.

Food Handler Card

Required for you and your staff in most counties. Get certified online in less than an hour.

Critical Violation

An issue during inspection that can shut you down on the spot (like unsafe temps, cross-contamination, or no hot water).

Daily Logs

Some counties require temperature logs, cleaning checklists, and refill records. Even if they don't, you should do it. It protects your business.



Marketing & Growth

Branding

Your name, look, vibe, and message. Great branding makes you memorable, referable, and easier to book.

Followers ≠ Revenue

Lots of likes don't always mean cash in the bank. Focus on your funnel, not just your feed.

Referral

Word-of-mouth is king in mobile food. Deliver great service and food, and your customers will sell for you.

Pre-Orders

Customers order and pay before the event. This can help reduce waste, improve prep, and lock in sales.



If you feel like everyone else is fluent in food truck talk—don't stress. Everyone starts somewhere. And now you're one glossary closer to speaking the language of licensed, profitable, mobile food business ownership.

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