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# takin' it to the streets

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# Meals on wheels

It's getting easier to find food on the street in and around Little Rock.

story by contributing writer eric francis • photos by jonny meyer

When a guy from New Jersey instructs you to meet him in a downtown alley at a certain hour, you might feel some misgivings. But the hour happens to be lunch hour. And the guy isn't some knuckle-popping goombah here to collect protection money. Nope, this particular Jersey boy is Hot Dog Mike and he's a Yankee in the Winthrop Rockefeller mold — the kind who comes down to Arkansas and brings us something we really need.

But where Rockefeller brought good government (and his personal fortune), Hot Dog Mike has brought ... okay, you've probably already guessed, but here it is: Hot dogs.

Now, sure, hot dogs existed in Arkansas well before Mike Juiliano found his way here from New Jersey (via North Carolina and Maryland). But he's one of a very few local practitioners of a very particular paradigm dog purveyance — the street dog, built to spec from a cart parked off the side of the road. And what he lays on a bun is nothing — repeat — nothing like that pathetic weenie you just nuked in your microwave and doused with — shudder — ketchup.

No sir, Hot Dog Mike is going to set you up. He'll make you a genuine Chicago dog or a BLT dog or a Polish sausage or a brat just heaped with fixings, some of which you've never imagined on a dog before.

And he'll make you love him in the process. That's because Hot Dog Mike is a great guy — and so is his able assistant on this day, Hot Dog Justin. In their snazzy fedoras, under the broad umbrella that spans the hot dog cart, they look a touch of Metropolis even though they're in an alley behind the Department of Human Services building downtown. It's a regular lunchtime haunt on Wednesdays — you can also find him outside The Hillcrest Fountain bar late on weekend nights — and they're gearing up for a crowd of regulars as well as unsuspecting passers-by.

The hot dog cart itself is shiny stainless steel, and has been towed here behind Mike's car. It's not particularly big — it would fit on top of a 4-by-8 foot sheet of plywood — but it's versatile, with bottled gas providing heat and room for several steamer trays and little nooks and crannies to store just about anything he and Justin might need. On the back is a sticker that declares, "I'm on the hot dog diet."

The menu changes from time to time as Mike tries out classic variations, as well as his own inventions, on customers. Today it includes a traditional Chicago dog: A Kosher frank on a steamed poppy seed bun, topped with a pickle spear, sliced tomato, neon green

pickle relish (the color is almost unsettling, but it's tasty), chopped onion, sport peppers (which carry a bite), mustard and celery salt.

Ever made one of those at home? Of course not.

There's also the BLT dog, which he designed himself, as well as Polish sausages that he'll be happy to dress with warm sauerkraut or chili or Sriracha sauce (another fiery condiment) or pretty much anything you want.

And what if a customer wants — shudder — ketchup on their dog?

"I'll tell them it's illegal," Hot Dog Mike says with a smile, "but that I'll do it anyway."

As smooth as Mike and Justin are during prep you'd think they'd been doing this forever, but it turns out Mike's only been in Arkansas three years.

"I moved down to help open the Capital Hotel" which had recently been renovated, he said, "then I fell in love with Mrs. Hot Dog Mike and she talked me into staying."

After leaving the Capital, Mike decided to go into business for himself. He got his setup a couple of months ago, got square with the city, and started selling hot dogs. Even Justin is a newly minted minion.

Still, once the customers appear, it's like a couple of old pros, with Mike handling the witty banter.

"I've ordered here, like, three times this week already," says Rionel Tee, a state Department of Education employee who came down with three co-workers, who collectively order nine dogs. "They're really good."

"I spike them with crystal meth," Hot Dog Mike confides, to much laughter.

Jeremy Kratz ordered up his current favorite, the Carolina dog. "Chili, slaw, mustard, onions, and it's awesome," he said.

"I usually do a hot dog with spicy mustard and kraut, and I try one of his specials," says Kelly Cutler.

"They're made with love," Kelly observes.

"That's true!" Mike confirms. "My grandma taught me that."

There's actually more than love that goes into them, but Mike's keeping mum about some of that. Trade secrets, don't you know. For instance, he'll tell you that the secret to a good dog is the "dirty water" they're cooked in — which is actually clean water, but it's been doctored up with various flavorants. Which ones? Never you mind, he's not telling.

Nor will he disclose what he paid for the nifty hot dog cart that allows him to pursue this part-time vocation. (In his other line of work, he's Michael Juiliano, wedding photographer.)



Mike Juiliano (aka Hot Dog Mike) prepares one of his signature dogs.

He will say, though, that you can get into the street vending business for less than \$5,000.

It's just that if you do, he'd rather you sold something other than hot dogs.

### STREET-FOOD RULES

Watch any food or travel channel on television and you'll pretty quickly come to the conclusion that, in big metropolitan areas, food carts and vans are ubiquitous — not to mention that you can get anything from hot chocolate to haute cuisine, if you know which one to patronize.

Right here in River City, on the other hand, the options are comparatively limited. According to Scott Massinelli, treasury manager of Little Rock's collector's office, there are 60 people or businesses licensed to operate mobile canteens; across the river in North Little Rock, only 13 such businesses are licensed. In Little Rock, such a license costs \$100 per year per vehicle, said Massinelli — thus one person with four funnel cake trailers would pay \$400 a year.

While the one-page list provided by Massinelli doesn't stipulate what type of food each license holder serves, the names give some clues: Allen's Hot Tamales is pretty obvious, as is Haygood's BBQ, Bev's & Guy's Ice Cream, and Mr. Henry's Catfish. Others are more esoteric — The Beez Neez, for instance, or Eric's Bazaar.

In addition to Hot Dog Mike, there appear to be three other vendors who specialize in putting dogs in buns: Kwik Dawg Stop, The Hot Dog Stand and Willy Dog USA. But who's to say that they might not serve the occasional brat at Jackie's Mobile Cafe, or Lewis & Edna's Mobile Grill, or the Chuck Wagon?

There's little question about the most common variety of street food, though: Mexican. More than 20 of the listed licensees evoke a Latino essence with names like El Jalapeno and El Milagro, or they sport keywords like "taqueria" (literally "taco shop") or plain old "taco."

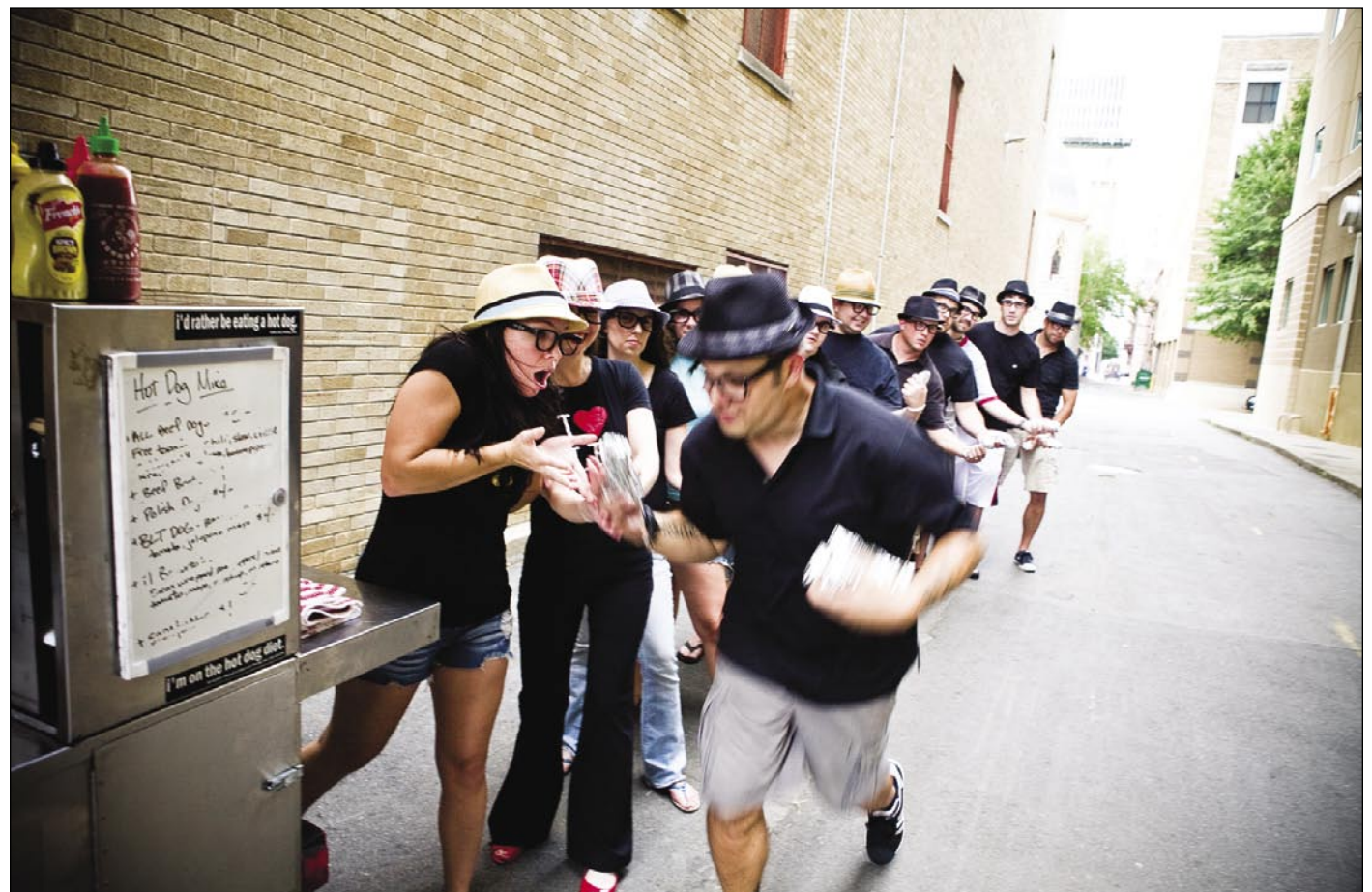
Outside of fairs and festivals, most folks hereabouts aren't accustomed to a quick meal that's walk-to instead of drive-thru. But that's gradually changing. Dana Carney is director of the city of Little Rock's zoning office, which oversees the permitting process, and he hears probably once a week from someone wanting to set up what's known in regulatory lingo as a "mobile canteen."

"The way it works now is that any person who wants to come in and operate a business has to have a city business license," explained Carney. "We have guidelines they need to follow that are based on zoning and that kind of thing. We give them a copy of these guidelines and allow them to get going, as long as they set up on the appropriately zoned properties."

Appropriate zones are currently restricted to C3 and C4 — which cover a broad swath



Hot Dog Mike updates his whereabouts via Twitter and Facebook.



Hot Dog Mike is one street-food vendor who has created a legion of fans, although Mexican food is the most common variety of street food.

of commercial uses, from retail to grocery to shopping centers — and the UU district, which covers downtown Little Rock. But while these vendors sell what's generically known as "street food," one place they cannot set up is on the actual street or other public right of way. (Ice cream trucks, of course, operate only on the street, but they have their own separate and comprehensive set of rules.)

Carney says the current regulations for mobile canteens have probably been in place about 20 years, and acknowledges that there is probably room for improvement.

"We're looking at updating the regulations because there are some new things coming along that the current regulations don't address as well as they should," he said, "[such as] the little hot dog carts and ice cream carts."

For his part, Carney says he has sampled the wares of many of the city's licensed street vendors, having stopped in "a time or two" at some of the increasingly common trucks offering south-of-the-border fare.

Ask Hot Dog Mike for his opinion of the regulatory hoops he had to jump through to get his cart licensed and he'll pause a second.

"I'm gonna say it's fair regulation, because I don't want to whine," he says. "I would like to see it revisited, though."



Some city regulations for mobile canteens may be out of date.

It took Mike about a month to get all the permit and zoning requirements satisfied, see, and while he understands the necessity of the regulations, he thinks it could be made easier for the wannabe street vendor to get out there and serve the public.

He should know. Hot Dog Mike's childhood memories are full of trips to the city — that's

New York City, natch — or to a ball game or to the Jersey Shore, often with his grandfather, and the hot dog carts were always a favorite treat.

"There's memories involved with street food and hot dogs," says Mike with a hint of nostalgia glistening in his eyes. "My grandfather is not with us anymore, and I have fond memories of going to street carts with him and enjoying the

food."

And having that kind of experience available here could help make Little Rock a better place, in Hot Dog Mike's view — and maybe even add to the capital city's charm.

"I think it's a cool thing, it makes it memorable for people who visit Little Rock," says Mike.

Through tools like Facebook and Twitter (@hotdog\_mike), he keeps the public apprised of his movements, menu changes, appearances by Mrs. Hot Dog Mike (she's very popular with his fans), and even "special guest doggers" (like Chef Donnie Ferneau). He's experimenting with delivery and is available for catering — in fact, he set up the cart at his own wedding back in June.

But it's clear that for Hot Dog Mike, the real action is out in public, where he can evangelize for the street food movement by bringing big city dogs to a hungry public. He dispenses wisdom with his food — such as "you dress the dog, not the bun."

And as you walk away, dabbing your chin with a napkin, you realize that there is, indeed, far more to the humble hot dog than you ever expected.

After all, as Hot Dog Mike likes to put it: "Phodography is an art!" 📷

Name: hop drive in; Width: 4.9835 in; Depth: 5 in; Color: Black plus three; Ad Number: 090810a658

Name: red door; Width: 4.9835 in; Depth: 5 in; Color: Black plus three; Ad Number: 090810a830