

Enter the Dragon: A street-food revolution begins with a whimper



I Jory Simkin one of the co-partners in Roaming Dragon - seen here in Vancouver July 28, 2010 - which aims to bring quality gourmet food to Vancouver's streets. John Lehmann/The Globe and Mail

As winners fail to meet deadlines, businessmen turn pilot project into a cash-grabbing free-for-all

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Roaming Dragon opened for business this week, offering a tantalizing choice of Asian duck confit salad, Japanese chicken karaage, Korean short rib tacos and Chinese pork belly sliders.

The sleek new food-vending truck, parked a stone's throw from popular Kitsilano Beach, is the first street vendor in Vancouver to offer more than hot dogs under a much-anticipated pilot project intended to inject a bit of sophistication and fun into the city's street culture.

But the project has hit a rough spot. None of the 17 winners in city hall's lottery for locations is expected to meet Saturday's much-anticipated deadline for opening. Roaming Dragon, which was not one of the winners, managed to open only by finding a winner to pay for use of the site.

The project has degenerated into a money grab by some businessmen trying to sell their prized locations for exorbitant prices: One asked for a cheque of \$18,000 upfront to cover the first five months of business; another wanted a 50-per-cent interest in the vending operation.

Also, the lottery for spaces may not have drawn as much interest as the city has said. Some businessmen had family and friends put in applications on their behalf in an effort to improve their chances of winning spaces. Winners who were placeholders had no intentions of ever opening a business at the locations.

And the city may not have the variety of food it anticipated: The lottery winners are free to change their menus to whatever they wish.

Jennifer Willoughby, an unsuccessful bidder with a taco cart called Off the Wagon, said the process of

selecting food carts was a sham. “[City hall] did not think this thing through,” Ms. Willoughby said. “It was very Mickey Mouse. They had a grand idea, but the process, well, it was pretty sad.”

The expansion of street food had been announced with considerable fanfare. “We’ve got a world-class city and people want a world-class street food scene to match,” Mayor Gregor Robertson has said. The councillors decided to update a city bylaw that restricted street food mostly to hot dogs, popcorn and chestnuts.

The city’s plan required vendors to be prepared to begin operations by July 31. The city said around 800 applications had been received. The winners and alternates, announced July 9, offered a variety of food from dim sum to borscht. They were then required to obtain a health permit before a city licence would be issued.

By Wednesday, health officials had approved only two vendors: an Italian stone-ground pizza cart which is planning to open on Tuesday, and a fresh, frozen and chocolate-covered fruit stand in Kitsilano that will eventually share the spot with Roaming Dragon.

Jason Apple and Jory Simkin, the operators of Roaming Dragon, had been working on their business plan for months. Their specially designed \$150,000 truck is fitted with wireless to expedite ordering, point-of-sale technology connected to the Internet and up-to-date appliances. Mr. Apple said he made an arrangement to share the Kitsilano spot – Roaming Dragon will take evenings – after speaking to city officials about “this black market” in locations.

City officials did not discourage it, he said. “The city is handing over a licence and enabling people to become landlords,” Mr. Apple said. “It’s pretty crazy, isn’t it. They just rent it out. They do not do anything except collect a cheque.”

City Councillor Heather Deal, who has championed the expansion of street-food fare for the past two years, was optimistic that the new food options would soon be on the street.

She was not concerned about the secondary market. The city’s goal was to provide a wide variety of safe, healthy and interesting food, she said. “It’s going to be market driven, it is going to be entrepreneurial,” she said, shrugging off concerns about the black market.

She anticipated as many as six spots may be open within the next week. The vendors could not meet the deadline because they all ordered their carts at the same time, she said. “That was one of the unintended consequences of this great success, with so many people excited and doing this,” she said.

The lottery was meant to be a process for having something on the street for this summer, and the city did not have time for a more complicated approval process, she said. “This was meant to get the system jump-started, to get people out there with exciting food and show that we could do this by this summer,” she said. By next summer, she anticipated a different process and several more locations.