

## Meals on wheels a huge hit with lunch crowd



**Bruins are lining up for food from trucks like the Thai-fusion Yum Yum Bowls truck above. UCLA appears to be one of the first universities to join the catering-truck craze by contracting with more than a dozen trucks.**

Check out the truck schedule.

"Nom nom" is the sound you're hearing at UCLA these days as Bruins gobble up meals from the official campus lunch trucks temporarily replacing the Bombshelter eatery.

Of course, the Vietnamese fusion Nom Nom Truck — named after the lip-smacking noises made by happy lunchers — is just one of the popular "roach coaches" debuting on campus. With construction crews demolishing the 40-year-old Bombshelter to make way for the new Court of Sciences Student Center in spring of 2011, ASUCLA Food Service Director Cindy Bolton knew she needed to provide the tricky combination of a long-term yet temporary lunch-service replacement.

That's when she and colleagues in the Associated Students of UCLA hit on it: Why not jump on the taco-truck bandwagon? High-concept fusion and gourmet food trucks



have become all the rage across Los Angeles. Now, UCLA appears to be one of the first universities to join the catering-truck craze by contracting with more than a dozen trucks and letting them drive into the middle of campus instead of simply hovering at the edges.

**Long lines at the Nom Nom Truck, which was founded by UCLA alumni. Nom Nom serves Vietnamese banh-mi sandwiches and fusion tacos.**

"We knew the trucks were out there, but until we started researching, we didn't realize how many there were and how deep the mobile culture had become," Bolton said. "Since we started, almost every day we have people reaching out to us, whether from people on campus making suggestions, or requests from trucks who want to join the program."

Since Jan. 4, between Boelter Hall and Geology, the Court of Sciences now hosts an ever-changing roster of two food trucks each day from 10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. One day might feature Indian dosas and grass-fed beef hotdogs; the next, the organic Green Truck and, of course, the **Nom Nom Truck, founded by UCLA alumni** and featuring Vietnamese banh-mi sandwiches, fusion tacos — and long lines. It seems to be an unusual set-up — several of the truck operators haven't heard of it elsewhere in the region, and the National Association of College and University Food Services said it's uncommon.

"This is one of the few cases I've heard of where a university is allowing catering trucks on campus for anything other than workers at a construction site," said Rachel Warner, a representative of the National Association of College and University Food Services. "We do know there are some schools that do, but it doesn't seem to be a common trend."

The trucks don't feature your typical construction-site fare or rock-bottom prices, although ASUCLA was sensitive to costs, Bolton said.

"We're very price-conscious, because we're the student association, but we didn't want the traditional, non-descript mobile catering carts that have been around for decades," Bolton explained. "We really wanted to tap into the new, hip, themed trucks."

Each truck signs a contract agreeing to pay ASUCLA a percentage of their sales in exchange for the right to park in the middle of campus amidst a flood of customers, in what several of the trucks now refer to as "the UCLA Food Court." As of late January, ASUCLA had contracts with 17 trucks and eight more in progress.

The trucks have been unexpectedly popular, Bolton said. "I haven't experienced feedback this strong on any of our programs before," she said. "We're getting interest from campus groups in bringing trucks out for their special events. A day hasn't gone by that I haven't gotten an e-mail — or 10 — wanting to do an article, provide feedback or get the truck schedule."

The throngs of customers even caught operators off guard. During the Nom Nom Truck's first visit, the truck ran out of its signature barbeque pork, and the cashier displayed a daunting stack of receipts around 1 p.m. "This is twice as many as we normally have by this time," she said.

They're not alone. An Asian-themed truck earned raised eyebrows when it ran out of rice, and a barbecue truck left customers hanging when the cashier ran out of change and had to rush over to the truck next door — but Bruins keep visiting.

It's great business, said a cashier with the Calbi truck, a Korean-fusion truck that attracted a line even in the rain. ASUCLA tried to warn the trucks about the UCLA lunch rush, "but in a way, you just have to experience it," Bolton said. They work the bugs out by their second visit, she added.

Many of the trucks broadcast their schedules via Twitter, which has become almost as *de rigueur* as fusion tacos in the new food-truck culture. Several trucks make a point to tweet upcoming visits to UCLA, and naturally, answered Twinterview questions. The UCLA arrangement is "pretty cool!" commented the Green Truck. "Great location," added South Philly Experience, which serves up variations on cheese steaks.

"We love UCLA's setup," tweeted Frysmith, which serves creative takes on chili-cheese fries, such as cheesy pork-and-kimchi fries. "Haven't heard of other schools doing food-truck contracting yet, but it's probably just a matter of time."

"UCLA is the first college we have done this with," tweeted Nom Nom, "but we're hoping that we will be able to work with other colleges in the future!"

The schedule is the final snag. The benefit, and the curse, is their mobility, which sometimes means a truck will cancel at the last minute, leaving ASUCLA scrambling for a replacement. The closest thing to a schedule is ASUCLA's official food-truck Twitter feed, [www.twitter.com/FoodTrucksUCLA](http://www.twitter.com/FoodTrucksUCLA) and [their Facebook page](#). But planned for Feb. 1 is a sign in the Court of Sciences [update: [here it is](#)] with a tentative two-week schedule, Bolton said. Fortunately, even when a truck does fall through, there's enough interest that it hasn't been a problem to find replacements.

The popularity just causes one problem for Bruins trying to save money and count calories.

"Oh noooo," tweeted one Bruin upon hearing that a favorite truck was due at UCLA the next day. "There goes trying to be responsible by bringing my lunch."

*You can also visit UCLA Today on Twitter for daily updates on the lunch trucks in addition to our daily news:*  
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